

The Corporate Curmudgeon—Dale Dauten

Success often means bringing an extra quality

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"Before all else, be armed." - Machiavelli

Think about the people you've seen thrive in organizational life, the ones who've glided up the hierarchy. Which of the following traits were critical to their rise:

- A. Intelligence.
- B. High-quality work.
- C. Being a nice/good person.
- D. None of the above.
- E. All of the above.

What got me thinking about the correlates of organizational success was the contrarian new book "Power," by Stanford B-School prof Jeffrey Pfeffer. Looking at the research Pfeffer reports, I believe you would argue that "D" is the correct answer.

First, Pfeffer says this: "Intelligence is often overrated as an attribute that will help people attain power." He points out that "people who are exceptionally smart think they can do everything on their own and do it better than everyone else." (Meanwhile, Pfeffer also summarizes a study that concludes, "Only about 4 percent of the variation in income was explained by variation in intelligence.")

As for doing excellent work, he writes, "Extensive research on promotions in organizations, with advancement either by changes in position, increases in salary, or both, also reveals the modest contribution of performance in accounting for the variation in what happens to people." And, "Not only may outstanding job performance not guarantee you a promotion, it can even hurt." The logic of the latter conclusion is that managers sometimes stall the advancement of highly effective employees for fear of losing them.

As for being a nice person, Pfeffer labels one of "Power's" sections "Likeability is Overrated," and offers his readers the example of Condoleezza Rice, who, when provost at Stanford, told a protégé, "People may oppose you, but when they realize you can hurt them, they'll join your side."

So, the research suggests that neither intelligence nor performance nor niceness is highly correlated with organizational success. But notice that word, "correlated." The statistical work of correlation is explaining variation - in this case, variations in promotions or income. That test masks the underlying truth: that you need all three, A, B and C. Take intelligence. What the research says is that being really smart isn't a huge advantage over being smart. But idiots don't get into the competition. Same with the screw-ups and the creeps.

I suspect that Pfeffer might argue with the third point. He mentions that Honda founder Soichiro Honda would hurl wrenches at employees who did inferior work. And I've read the rumor that Steve Jobs asks employees he encounters around the workplace what they're working on, and if the response doesn't sound inspired, he fires them on the spot, a process known as "being

Steved." But these examples are of entrepreneurs, people who have NOT skillfully climbed a pyramid, but rather, caused one to be built beneath them. Note, too, that for every Steve Jobs, there's a Dave Thomas, the late founder of Wendy's, who was much beloved (and who agreed to write jacket blurbs for two of my books, even though there was nothing in it for him).

The point is that promotions are a competitive sport, and that the winners have "all of the above" and then something extra. We'll consider some of Pfeffer's suggestions next time, but having observed many high-achievers, I can tell you that what they have in common is the will to be uncommon. They understand that to be special means having specialties, to have something else besides the usual qualities. They don't just work hard and assume it all will work out; rather, they work hard at making their something else work.

Dale Dauten is co-founder of AgreementHouse.com, a company that resolves business disputes. Contact him at daledauten.com

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