



## REVISITING “TALENT—AT WHAT COST”

I was disappointed that the article “Talent—At What Cost?” by Janice Molloy, which appeared in the September issue, didn’t offer a more critical analysis of Malcolm Gladwell’s July 22, 2002, article in *The New Yorker* magazine. Most of Mr. Gladwell’s conclusions—which are repeated in *The Systems Thinker* article—can be discounted based on fallacies in his logic, chiefly his strawman attack on the original assertions made in *The War for Talent* by Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones, and Beth Axelrod (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2001).

In his op-ed piece, Mr. Gladwell misleads us in asserting that the authors of *The War for Talent* define talent by high scores on intelligence quotient tests. Closer scrutiny reveals that there is more to the authors’ framework than talent as defined by I.Q.:

“In the most general sense, talent is the sum of a person’s abilities (p. xii). . . . Managerial talent is some combination of a sharp strategic mind, leadership ability, emotional maturity, communications skills, the ability to attract and inspire other talented people, entrepreneurial instincts, functional skills and the ability to deliver results” (p. xiii).

In the authors’ definition of talent, intelligence quotient is nowhere to be found. Mr. Gladwell, therefore, argues against a position never actually asserted.

The original authors may indeed place high value on “smart” people. Even so, there are various incarnations of “smart” in the world. Recent books and articles promote the value of “emotional intelligence,” not to mention the a posteriori value in political smartness, creativity, leadership, and any number of characteris-

tics that can be used to describe the highest performers—and smart people—in an organization. Talent is many things, and evidence of its viability in helping any company changes over time.

In drawing attention to the importance of the “system” surrounding the “talent,” Mr. Gladwell is on reasonably firm ground. But he goes too far in attacking the individual’s ascent, particularly when what he attacks is ultimately the foundation of our capitalistic culture, which has—and always will—reward rugged individualism unfortunately at the expense of the group. Mr. Gladwell wears out Enron as his primary example of all that can go wrong with a focus on unbridled promotion and salaries, albeit with a tip of the hat to Procter & Gamble and Wal-Mart. He misses many other examples of failure despite unimaginable talent. For example, David Halberstam’s book, *The Best and the Brightest*, highlights the Kennedy administration—arguably the most concentrated group of intelligence (Ivy League educations one and all) and ambition to occupy the White House—and its failure to form a winning strategy in Vietnam. The point is that three instances do not a theory make. Gladwell’s generalizations unravel like a cheap sweater.

To wit, Mr. Gladwell’s use of the Navy’s experience with Nazi submarines presents only a partial view of hundreds of factors that may be used to explain the change in success rate, including, of all things, coincidence. There is no doubt that patterns can be discerned from points of failure and success in organizations, and we should learn from these findings; but the ancient wisdom now cliché, “all things in moderation,” provides as

plausible an explanation of Enron and the Navy as the logic applied in Gladwell’s *The New Yorker* article.

If there is any value to corporate leadership to be taken from Mr. Gladwell’s treatise, it is the doubt he casts upon blind worship of the Ivy League MBA. James Makens, my former professor of marketing at Wake Forest University, was known to open his executive MBA marketing class with the following observation, “You’re getting your MBA because you want a new job, or you want a new spouse.” Never did he correlate talent with a degree. Regardless of the academic pedigree, neither should we.

What if talent is overrated? Try winning market share without it. In the end, companies had better nurture and celebrate talent—correctly defined in all its incarnations—before that talent finds fulfillment somewhere else. Perhaps the best evaluative question to be asked when assessing the degree to which salary or other freedoms should be extended to attract and keep employees is, “Would I want this person working for the competition?”

The missing element from both Mr. Gladwell’s article (and Ms. Molloy’s version save the last two sentences) is the focus on the need for underlying systems. Can a company embrace both a talent focus and a systems focus simultaneously? Addressing this question in an article would have far better served your readership than summarizing and accepting Gladwell’s fallacies of logic.

Best regards,

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