

## Watch out for Lane 4: Psychology of success

If you have ever watched an Olympic swimming race you may have noticed that the best swimmer always seems to be in Lane 4. You won't find Michael Phelps, for example, starting off in Lane 1 or Lane 8, or indeed any of the other remaining lanes. This is because lanes are assigned by seeding time, with the fastest, by tradition, being placed in Lane 4. And so that's where we look when the race is underway. Our eyes are drawn to the likely winner.

The same sort of thing happens when we are selecting talented staff. We look for a winner. This means we want everything to be in place, the 'full package' to be on display, with all the boxes ticked. Frankly what we are after is someone who is above average; preferably well above average, right across the board.

### Mind the spikes

But is this sensible? On the surface it appears to be the most logical thing to do, however really successful people often have 'spiky' profiles. It doesn't matter what you look at, and how many competencies you measure, the real hotshots are exceptional at some things *and* pretty average at others. Pick any successful entrepreneur or business leader and what you notice is their key strength. Chances are this is what has got them to the top. So it's not that they don't have any weaknesses, in this respect they are the same as everyone else, but what they do possess is an area of massive competence.

Back with our swimming analogy, sure the best thing to do is to look in Lane 4 if you're after a champion swimmer; but if you're looking for something else, make sure you cover the entire pool. Otherwise you might just miss what you really want. So it is that Richard Branson famously has trouble distinguishing between gross and net profit, and yet runs a multi-billion pound empire; and other business guru's frequently lack the personal touch, but still manage to inspire us.

This brings us onto another important point. Well two actually. Firstly it's wise to remember that a spiky profile can be the sign of great potential - but that in a well balanced organisation any weaknesses that come with it can be compensated for by people with complementary strengths. Secondly, that you may ultimately be wasting a great deal of money on training and development! Why? Because if all of this is true you want people to play to their strengths, to reinforce their strengths, not to try and drag an area of comparative weakness up a few notches – but probably never to a level that will make any difference.

## In search of excellence

The upshot is that you should go out of your way to attract as broad a range of people to your organisation as you can. But you obviously want those with high levels of self-awareness as they will have the insight to be able to maximise their strengths. This is something on which you cannot compromise, and one way of detecting this ability is to explore a person's emotional intelligence. Also to be tuned to those factors that might 'derail' success. What is it in a person's character that in *uncontrolled* excess could lead to disaster?

However the main point is to give everyone the opportunity to display excellence. Spot their distinctive talent and you will discover the key to their potential success. But to do this may take more than just an interview and a few psychometric tests...

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