

“A” Players and “B” Players: It’s Not Either/Or

As I write this Productivity Update, Covid-19 infections are hitting new highs and, in many places, hospital ICUs are approaching full capacity. In frightening times like this, writing about business issues might seem callously out-of-touch. But perhaps focusing, just for a moment, on issues that, in spite of what dominates the news, are still relevant to the business of businesses can provide a brief respite and some useful insights.

So, let’s look at a fresh perspective on “A” players and “B” players.

It is interesting how old things can become new again. Back in the early-1980s, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., management consultants at McKinsey & Company, launched a study of management techniques in 75 of America’s most successful companies. The result was their book, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies.

Among their findings was their debunking of the popular belief that successful companies were made up primarily of “A” players – the smartest, most skilled and best educated employees. What they found was that successful companies were staffed for the most part by strong “B” players and a few “A” players. The “B” players were the backbone of the company. And, further, most “B” players were happy where they were, rather than striving to move up to the next rung on the corporate ladder.

In most cases, the “B” players simply loved, and took pride in, their work. They didn’t want the next promotion in line if it took them away from what they saw as their craft. These were the engineers who resonated to being a good engineer, accountants who just loved digging into the numbers, and HR managers whose main satisfaction was dealing with the complexity of balancing the needs of the company with employees’ needs. Other “B” players had a passion for interests outside of what they saw as their day job: musicians, artists, writers.

The subject of “A” and “B” players re-surfaced recently, with a slightly new slant, in author Kim Scott’s book, Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss without Losing Your Humanity. She talked about Superstars and Rock Stars. Superstars are ambitious high achievers, the “A” players. Rock Stars are solid as a rock, the “B” players.

Rock Stars are simply not interested in getting ahead for its own sake. Most Rock Stars would like to make more money, but not if it means they can't become better at the work they most enjoy doing. Or not if it means they won't have enough time to pursue their interests outside of work. Most are more interested in satisfaction, fulfillment in the work they do, then they are in acquiring the trappings of increased success.

An organization needs both Superstars and Rock Stars. It is too easy to be mesmerized by the Superstars and take for granted the Rock Stars. Both need to be recognized and rewarded. An example cited by Peters and Waterman was one of the large, very successful companies they looked at that had recognized that the sales contests they had in place provided juicy prizes for first, second and third place finishers, but provided nothing for the remainder of their large sales force. They revamped their sales contests so that every salesperson that met his or her goal got a prize and recognition for their efforts.

Simplistic either/or categories, like "A" players versus "B" players or Superstar versus Rock Star, are extreme characterizations that ignore the middle ground between them. Real life is a bit more complex. Some Superstars hit a point in their life where circumstances indicate dictate that they slow down for a bit and become Rock Stars. Likewise, a Rock Star may become a Superstar under new circumstances.

How can you help people where they are and where they want to go? Simply put, get to know your people as human beings. Create opportunities for a series of informal conversations. Listen to what is said and how it is said, as well as what is not said. Your authentic interest in the people with whom you work creates the trust and opportunity for you to get to know what they want, where they want to go, and what they see as their best contributions.

I know that getting to really know your people is particularly difficult within our current "physical distancing" business climate because you no longer have routine face-to-face contact with them. But the sense of isolation that results from these orders also creates a yearning for connection that can make people more open to the opportunity for real, authentic talks, even if they are by phone or video. It's worth a shot. And taking action by reaching out is, by itself, an antidote to the atmosphere fear and uncertainty we're all dealing with. Fear shuts us down. Taking action helps us see a better future and motivates us to work toward it.

General George Patton is said to have responded to yet more gloomy news, when things were going badly for America in World War II, "Take not counsel of your fears." Good advice then, and good advice now.

We *will* beat this pandemic.

Stay strong.