



The Key is People

I “relearn” lessons all of the time. Take car keys, for example. While I know that it’s important to take my car keys with me before locking the car door, I’ve had to relearn this lesson by having to pay a locksmith to unlock a car door in which I’ve left the keys. Now, I have a car that does not lock when the keys are anywhere inside of the car, so that’s a lesson I don’t have to relearn anymore. Another lesson I’ve relearned a few times is not to criticize someone when their mother is listening. I am doing much better with this one. However, there is one lesson that I’ve relearned a number of times over the past few years and that is “the success of any project is directly dependent on the person assigned to lead the project.” That is, people matter—and they matter more than you think.

Let’s say that there is a good idea. A group supports the idea, and there is a decision to go forward and try some endeavor. A responsible person is assigned to lead the endeavor and after some period of time, the results are reviewed to determine whether the endeavor was a success. More times than not, the key to the success of the endeavor is the person assigned to lead it. Almost always, the success has come about because of, not only the good idea, but the enthusiasm, motivation, and persistence of the lead person. The right person, with the right level of enthusiasm, can take a mediocre idea and have great success with it; while the wrong person, without great enthusiasm, motivation, and persistence can take a great idea and fail miserably. Some endeavors fail miserably and others exceed all expectations and, usually, the results have a direct relationship to the person leading the charge.

From a manager’s point of view, if you assign someone who is too young and inexperienced, then there is a struggle to figure out what needs to be done and how to approach the problems. And the opposite is problematic as well. If you assign someone who is too senior, then many times they are too busy, too comfortable, or too successful to take on another assignment. In either case, the result may be a failure. There are always exceptions to the rule, of course, and other things to consider. The attractive part about assigning a senior person is that you get a known name (sometimes well known) and a known track record. You get someone with experience. However, more frequently than not, a great senior person will turn down even a great opportunity. Midlevel people can be solid and are the lowest risk for assignment to important

projects. Those that are still hungry for advancement and are motivated usually succeed because they are usually willing to put in the hard work.

While we don’t live in a generalized world, the discussion above is certainly a generalization. There is no substitute for a specific individual who is excited about an opportunity, hungry to lead the effort, and can see the path as building their background (laying their railroad tracks). Experience is also very important when it comes to selecting a lead for a specific endeavor. Specifically as an editor, these considerations are important when asking someone to write a review or tutorial paper, or to guest edit a special section, or to become an associate editor of a journal. From a manager’s point of view, the specifics are clear when assigning project leads, section and branch heads, and senior staff positions. In fact, about a year ago, I assigned a project lead for a construction of a space telescope that is critical to the mission success of a star-mapping program. With a \$240M program budget, the assignment list was very short. In these cases, you are betting on the people as much as you are betting on technology, so it is important to choose a great project lead.

So, what do I relearn about assignments of people to projects? Do not assign an average performer to an important project and expect outstanding results unless you have significant time yourself to dedicate to the project. Do not “settle” for the first person who wants an opportunity. Spend the time looking for someone who is outstanding and has a great reputation because the extra time will be well spent. It is also worth making coassignments to junior people so that they can be mentored and develop into competent project leads. Make sure you have quality people for tasks in your critical path (i.e., spend time recruiting quality people). Quality people are what make great branches, great divisions, great laboratories, great companies, and great societies. It is always about the people.

There is one other thing that I continue to relearn. The simple things in life are usually the things I cherish and enjoy the most. This one always surprises me when I relearn it, but it is worthwhile because there is nothing like the smile of a child or the way the waves come in from the ocean. I don’t mean to forget these things, but unlike relearning the “its all about people” lesson, relearning the “simple thing” lesson is always a joy.

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