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Ability and ambition

Fancy being a guru or a management consultant? Easy. First start by drawing a square. Then subdivide it by mid-point vertical and horizontal lines drawing a box with four squares. This is a famous 2×2 . Now we need H for high and L for low above top left and top right; as well as top and bottom vertical lines.

OK? Now for the theory (in fact any theory). Above the top H and L write *ability* and between the H and L on the side write *ambition*. So now we have four types. And there is “the model”. Now all you have to do is describe the four types, how they behave and how to manage them.

Of the four squares two are always pretty straightforward. They are always the consistent high/high or low/low boxes. So in this example they refer to people who are both *or* neither able or ambitious. Thus high/high people are good news. They have capacity, skill and knowledge. And presumably their ambitions drive them to be hard-working, achievement-oriented and the like. They are potentially high-flyers.

The war for talent is about finding and holding on to these motivated and capable people. One should however look carefully into the nature and ultimate goal of their ambition . . . which may make them less attractive.

The low/low people are bad news. Talentless and feckless. Little ability and little ambition to exploit what little ability they have. They are very clearly from the select out-group. They can be perfectly able, steady and reliable blue-collar workers but not helpful support staff for entrepreneurial offices where people are expected to “muck in” and stay late in busy times.

But this is where it becomes interesting. What explains the seeming paradox of people in the other two boxes. First high/low – the personnel with great ability and little ambition. There may be many explanations. They may not be fully aware of their abilities, having never had an opportunity to evaluate or test them. Or their environment may not allow for their development and exploitation. It may be that they are lazy or content or likely to inherit much money or property.

They could however be fruitfully reminded of the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14) where people are instructed not to ignore, downplay or waste their unique (God-given) talents. But people need to know both how to find out what they are good at, and what to do to realize their talents.

Secondly, there is the sadder and often problematic individual with great ambition but little talent. They have probably graduated with distinction

from self-esteem courses but flunked school and other “educational opportunities”. Much of course depends on what they are ambitious for. And it depends on what you could describe as talent or ability.

In nearly all jobs there is a positive correlation between cognitive ability and success (however that is measured). One exception is sales: you need confidence, a modicum of charm and resistance (ego strength) as much as anything else. Salespeople need robust self-belief and the ability to triumph over frequent setback and rejection. All the more important as everyone is a salesperson today.

The crucial questions that remain are four-fold. Where do abilities come from (nature or nurture)? How do people discover their abilities? What are the origins of ambition? Can or does ambition dry up? A pity the model does not answer those questions.

But consultants and trainers know that people really love these simple categorical models. The really clever ones try three dimensions and the result is a cube. But somehow it’s too difficult to think of eight types some of whom are high, low, high and others low, high, low.

So we return to the 2×2 . One trainer collects these much as people collect beer mats or match boxes. It seems that most problems can be described in these categorical terms. Most people know about the SWOT Model (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).

The trouble of course is that typologies are so crude. Very, very few human characteristics fit neatly into two types. Even sex and perhaps right or left hand preference, which seem obvious examples, don’t quite fit the bill. People differ on dimensions. Height, intelligence and so on are linear concepts. Whilst we may talk about tall and short people or bright and dull managers, we know these are based on either arbitrary or population based statistics.

So within each box there remains great variety. Thus in the high, high box there may be a very, very ambitious and quite able manager who is subtly and importantly different from a pretty ambitious and extremely able manager. Ah, so what one does is split each box into two.

Much depends on the observation that there are two types of people in the world. Those who believe there are two types and those that don’t.