

The Wrong Stuff

By George E. Gercken, Ph.D.

A technical sales manager was performing well on the job, making his numbers and promoting people from diverse backgrounds. He thought his performance would speak for itself when a promotion came up. His director, however, was a former military officer who was more concerned with his FITREP (Fitness for Duty Report) than actual accomplishments. Moreover, in this director's world, an officer who did not receive a thumbs-up from his commander would falter in his career. Consequently, the director spent all of his time kissing up to his superiors and dumping down to his underlings.

At another organization, there was a manager, an engineer, who was terrific at managing and delivering on complex projects and developing her people. She, too, thought her performance would earn her a promotion. Another manager, however, came into the organization with the stated goal of becoming its leader. Despite the appropriate ambition, this individual spent all of their time maneuvering, kissing up and dumping down, criticizing others while gathering increased responsibility and power.

Both managers were competent, hardworking professionals. Yet, they were up against political operatives, people who seek power and influence at the cost of others' success and the organization's prosperity. Buddying up to these individuals only emboldens them further. The managers eventually understood that they could not expect a snake to become a bunny rabbit. They left their organizations for other pursuits. In one instance, it meant a step down and a salary cut just to get away from the dysfunction.

Such machinations have always existed in the workplace. But in this era, they seem to have become an entity unto themselves. Some would say our national leaders are partly to blame, as access to social media enables them to demonstrate their game-playing to millions of people. We see the spinning, if not actual lying, they engage in without consequence. In business, when someone spends so much time expertly undercutting others for their own benefit, what chance do the people stand who actually do their jobs?

Organizations lose good talent, the people who have the right stuff, due to political operatives who look good on the surface but have the wrong stuff. They pollute the environment for others and create a toxic workplace.

To stop this from happening, executives must hold all employees to the same standards and expectations. This means not falling for political operatives' flattery or back-door attempts to gain favor and advantage. Ultimately, higher-level managers bear responsibility for the intrigue when they let themselves get drawn into a web of false narratives. This may be due to feeling flattered or believing that the political operatives are providing inside information to which they would not otherwise be privy.

The best solution is to avoid hiring these schemers in the first place, but that is easier said than done. Such people are typically articulate and almost always have the “right” answers to interview questions. They demonstrate compelling social skills. They tend to parrot back what they are being told, expertly mimicking interviewers’ stated priorities as their own. They sail through the interview process, appearing to be outstanding applicants because their strength is in the presentation.

Research indicates that interview impressions alone are correct fifty-six percent of the time. Those odds are only slightly better than a coin toss. Yet, professional interviewers who take a critical eye, employ objective indicators and conduct a rigorous screening process can often ferret out the political operatives. At that point, however, they will find themselves facing intense disbelief from hiring managers who have been duped by these “*show versus go*” people. Selecting another applicant then requires a great deal of energy and discussion, but persistence is vital. Remember, when a job applicant seems too good to be true, you must screen them even more closely.

An organization’s investment in a professional interviewing process pays off in its employees’ long-term tenure and the successful outcomes they produce. An organization that hires well acquires competent people who do good work. It develops and promotes employees who demonstrate commitment and a solid work ethic. This creates a healthy, productive workplace that attracts and retains strong talent. It has no space for political operatives.