A brilliant strategy — Laziness

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It's an accepted understanding that we equate laziness with poor prospects of success. It's the early bird/eager beaver and all those other hopelessly chipper animals who have always had the inside track in life. Unlike the ants, the grasshoppers amongst us have always been thought to be doomed.

Maybe not. I was reading an article recently about a Napoleonic-era general who had a novel way of choosing his military leaders, and in the process gave a different spin to the concept of laziness as an undesirable characteristic.

In order to choose commanding officers, the military genius divided soldiers into groups, assessing whether they were physically aggressive and proficient or inactive and lazy, and also whether they were intelligent or stupid. He then rated the combinations of physical and mental attributes in terms of which variations would make for the best leaders.

He decided that the worst possible leaders were physically aggressive and stupid because they had the greatest potential to wreak havoc, being prone to compounding their mistakes with industriousness. Also at the bottom of the list were the lazy and stupid, for obvious reasons. Surprisingly, he wasn't keen on the officers who were both physically aggressive and strong as well as intelligent. He believed they would focus too much on demonstrating their prowess and getting it right to be truly effective leaders.

Instead, he decided the best candidates were the intelligent but lazy officers, ones who could understand the mission and the complexity of leadership but, unlike the go-getters, would be motivated by sloth to be efficient. He thought they would be more likely to delegate and would naturally be inclined by laziness to find the easiest, fastest way to get things done. He was looking for less activity and more results.

When you think about it, it does make a certain amount of sense. I think all of us knew someone in high school who was smart as hell, popular, a born leader, but scraped through with marks just above the "out-you-go" line. They weren't head of the student council or sweating their way to the top of the class. They were more likely to be organizing student expeditions to rock concerts or other poorly-chaperoned field trips, usually at a profit to themselves and a good time had by all. They were showing that given proper motivation, they were capable of great feats of organization and leadership. In the meantime, they had the luxury of their sloth to dream fantastic plans that would never have occurred to the rest of us otherwise-occupied foot soldiers. And no doubt you can find them today lolling in the Cayman Islands after selling off their wildly successful hi-tech start-ups.

So while I laughed, I also thought of the general's shrewdness in picking leaders who were motivated to think and act strategically, not just capably. He looked at skill sets and capabilities in a non-traditional way, not accepting the norms society decrees or books enshrine.

After all, if you couldn't get past the idea that industriousness is the best indicator of leadership, you'd also miss the fact that some of the best strategic thinking comes from brainstorming. And some of the best brainstorming comes from gazing into space—or being apparently lazy.

Ah yes, the dangers of diligence, of getting things done for the sake of getting things done. While business demands lots of productive foot soldiers, more and more we are also called upon to demonstrate leadership and strategic thinking. It's not that we should all be lazy, but just that it's good to remember the strategic benefit of a bit of unstructured time to think, create and reflect.

I think it's particularly important for women, who through nature or socialization (an argument for another day) are often particularly industrious as they seek to prove themselves and are perhaps so focussed on getting tasks done that the question of whether NEED to be done sometimes goes unasked. Or those who are so busy getting everything done that they don't take the time to be strategic about their own careers and how they will leverage all the good work they are doing so diligently.

So perhaps, somewhere, somehow in a business school far, far, away, there will be offered a course on the development of laziness as a leadership strategy.

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