# Entrenched Mediocrity

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## Introduction

I am loath to discuss organizational issues because I am strongly opposed to any form of office politics; however, on this issue I can remain silent no longer. I am working at a company – let's call it *IniTech* – that operates a very run-of-the-mill small OLTP system with about a dozen clustered servers, SQL Server backends, blah, blah, blah. I was brought to the company as a SQL Server production performance and replication specialist.

Here's the response to an email I sent regarding a failed backup job during my first week at the company:

*"I don't know what most of this means."*

If this had been the first example of my co-worker's apparent ineptitude, then my motivation for writing this paper may never have materialized. I don't want to demean my co-worker so I will leave this as it is.

My coworker's response provides me with another data point for the issue I want to discuss – MEDIOCRITY. Mediocrity is defined by Merriam-Webster as the state of being "of moderate or low quality, value, ability, or performance: ordinary, so-so". This definition begs the question: does anyone get up in the morning saying, "Today I'm going to be below average."?

I've been in the industry in roles from programmer to architect for 20 years during which time I've seen my share of co-workers who were less than stellar, heard the stories of others, and researched organizational culture all of which has lead me to the following generalization: mediocre people are more common in large companies than small; why? Furthermore, how does mediocrity survive in an organization?

## Contributing Factors

I believe in Natural Selection. The principle states that the strong survive and the weak perish. A related human sociological theory, Social Darwinism, was first discussed by Herbert Spencer in his seminal work *The Social Organism* in 1860. Spencer's work is the foundation upon which the Social Darwinist movement has flourished. The Social Darwinism theory suggests that "There are underlying, and largely irresistible, forces acting in societies which are like the natural forces that operate in animal and plant communities. One can therefore formulate social laws similar to natural ones." (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2001) However, unlike Natural Selection, Social Darwinism suggests that "The best-adapted and most successful social groups survive ..." (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2001) Not the strongest, not the smartest but the "best-adapted". With this perspective an answer to my question begins to come into focus.

## The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

There is general agreement among Organizational Dynamics researchers that employees may be broadly categorized into three groups. (Fine, 2009) My own nomenclature for these groups is the *motivated-doer*, the *do-what-I'm-told*, and the *do-nothing*. Statistical samplings suggest that the population distribution of these groups within an organization is: the motivated-doer represents 5-10% of the employees, 70% of employees are do-what-I'm-told types, and as many as 10-20% of employees are do-nothing types. The dominance of one group over the other within the organization where the three groups co-exist defines the culture of the organization. But, it is management failure to empower the motivated-doer employees with a stated organizational vision that supports a high-performance culture that allows the organizational culture to be defined by the dominant employee group thus allowing mediocrity to rein. (Luyet, 2004)

The motivated-doers are characterized as individuals who proactively seek to improve the organization by trying new approaches, new technologies. Motivated-doers live by the credo expressed in George Bernard Shaw's words, "Some men see things as they are and say why - I dream things that never were and say why not." Motivated-doers provide leadership, they take ownership of problems, and accept the accountability resulting from their actions. Yet, management eschews this energy because of the instability and uncertainty that they perceive it creates. With their enthusiasm and energy motivated-doers push other employee types challenging them to keep-up. The motivated-doer does not understand boundaries or limits defined by the status quo they seek innovation in processes and systems; characteristics that drive growth and profitability. Yet, it is these characteristics of the motivated-doer that cause angst and fear for management, the characteristics that drive management to reject the motivated-doer as a potential destabilizing force within the organization.

The opposite of a motivated-doer is the do-nothing. The do-nothing employee survives within the organization by avoiding all risk; the do-nothing never innovates. The do-nothing employee is a cancer within the organization because his apathy will eventually consume all others. Management overlooks the risk that the do-nothing brings to the organization because he is thought to bring no uncertainty.

The majority of an organization's workforce inhabits the safety of the do-what-I'm-told category. This type of employee is cherished by management for his punctuality, his adherence to established process, and the comfort he engenders. The do-what-I'm-told will follow when there is certainty that his actions will bring no risk to himself. These employees may also contribute ideas for innovation, but only at management's behest and only when they have confidence that the approach will be well-received. The do-what-I'm-told employee is most valued by management because of their safety if not the monotony they exemplify.

## Organizational Failure

There is but one place for blame when mediocrity's insidiousness lingers within an organization; that place is at management's feet. Organizational culture is created and sustained by management's definition or the lack thereof of values, attitudes, and vision. An organization's ability to consistently create superior results is inherent in the high-performance culture created by management. (Luyet, 2004) As Lou Gerstner stated, "I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn't just one aspect of the game – it is the game…" (Lou V. Gerstner, 2002) Yet, with decades of research in the field of Organizational Dynamics, management at many IT companies continues to cling to outdated, ineffective, and ultimately destructive policies that thwart innovation, retard growth, and drive the best and brightest employees from their organizations. "In short, businesses with high-performance cultures are winners, and no person of substance would work anywhere else." (Lou V. Gerstner, 2002) Management's failure to create a culture supportive of motivated-doers ensures that their companies will remain mediocre.

## Conclusion

Creating a high-performance culture requires that management support the four components of "collaborative environment, accountability, focus, and robust processes." (Wriston, Spring 2007) Companies where employees are driven by a shared vision, a common purpose will innovate and lead within their markets. High-performance companies will naturally repel the mediocre employee who will seek an environment in another company wherein he may survive. The "failure to develop such a culture is the path to organizational mediocrity, bankruptcy, or even oblivion." (Wriston, Spring 2007) Management leadership accounts for "60% of worker performance" (Ruby A. Rouse & Richard S. Schuttler, 2010); therefore, management is also accountable for the mediocre performance of employees.

## About the Author

Ron is a Senior DBA (MCDBA) who specializes in performance optimization, replication, and security.

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