

## Our Personal Bias

By Markku Kauppinen

A couple of years ago I received a call from a consultant who was using *Extended DISC Job Analysis* with one of his clients. He was in charge of a project to help a client identify the behavioral requirements of a successful store manager. While the top management was reasonably satisfied with the performance of most of the stores, it also believed that many of the managers were doing only a mediocre job. However, no one was quite sure how to best improve their performance.

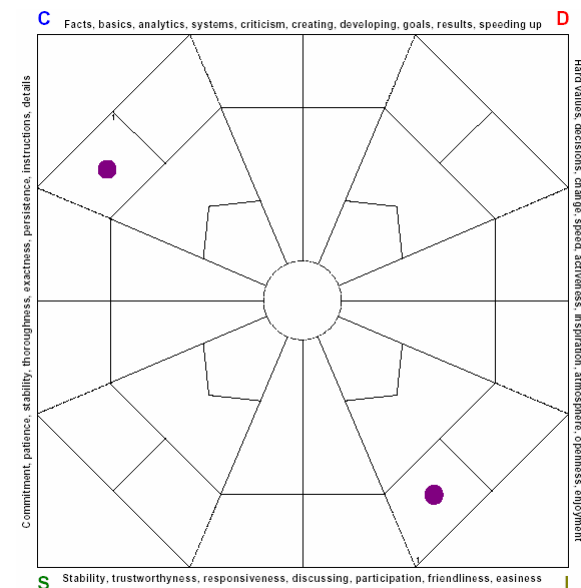
The client was a furniture retail chain in the South. It was a family-owned business. The company had been in business for almost 80 years and was doing well, with sales of about \$200 million and growing steadily.

Change was about to take place. The company's CEO was going to retire soon and his son was going to take the helm. The transition was expected to be fairly smooth because the son had been involved in the business from an early age. Most of the employees knew him or at least of him. Also, everyone had always known that this hand-off of the leadership position would eventually take place. The father had been in the same position 35 years ago as he took over from the founder of the company – his father.

The father and the son were quite different. Although both were very committed to the success of the business, their leadership styles were almost opposite. The father was very outgoing and gregarious. He seemed to have endless energy that he expressed freely. The son, although likeable enough, was analytical, systematic and more difficult to get to know.

The father, the son and the top four store managers were asked to participate in the assessment. The results of the *Job Analysis* revealed that the father and the son perceived

the ideal store manager behaviors to be almost opposite. Father believed the best style of manager should be outgoing, talkative, enthusiastic, persuasive, animated and energetic. He believed – and we see this happen often – that the ideal store manager essentially should be like him. After all, he was successful. His results indicated that the best kind of manager was an I-style in our model (see the dot in the bottom right quadrant on the model below).



The son, on the other hand, deemed the ideal style to be analytical, logical, precise, systematic and more cautious. His results indicated that the best kind of manager was a C-style (the dot in the top left quadrant).

However, the most startling finding was that none of the top store managers could define the ideal store manager. Consequently, their assessment results were what we often call a “flat-line”. It indicated that the store managers perceived the ideal style manager should be able to do it all – they should be able to demonstrate all behavioral styles at the same time. Obviously, it is an impossible feat.

The consultant was puzzled. How could all of the top store managers generate the same type of results?

Further discovery revealed that both the father and the son visited the stores often. It was part of the culture to “visit the troops” often. When the father showed up, it was always a party atmosphere. He would enthusiastically talk to everyone, shake their hands and ask questions about the employees’ family members. “How is your daughter, Sue, doing? Is she still playing volleyball? He did not always get the names and the sports right, but his smile and enthusiasm was genuine. He was also full of fun ideas about how to build excitement at the stores. “Let’s have a sales contest!! The salesperson who sells the most next month will win a weekend for two in Las Vegas. This will be lots of fun!” he would declare cheerfully.

The son’s visits were a different story. On the way to the manager’s office, he would shake a few hands and say some words. But, he would quickly find his way to the manager’s office and dive into the store’s books. “Bob, your overtime expense is still creeping up”, he would comment. “You need to get this under control soon. I want you to email your weekly numbers to me every Monday morning. I want to stay informed.”

Clearly the managers were receiving very mixed signals. On the one hand the emphasis was squarely on the people-side. On another, the focus was very task-focused and operational. It was virtually impossible for the managers to respond to both demands. They were in an uncomfortable spot and when asked what the ideal style should be, the answer was not surprising anymore. You needed to be a little bit of everything. “Is Clark Kent looking to change careers?”

Who we are creates a significant bias at many levels. It affects how we see the world and what we believe creates success. To deny this adversely affects our performance. To be aware of it, we are armed with the knowledge to improve our success. What are your leaders expecting from their employees?

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## Leave It at the Stream

By Marshall Goldsmith

“Feedforward” sounds like some eating technique you’d see advertised on late-night TV, guaranteeing weight loss with a faster metabolism. Sorry, folks: Feedforward won’t make you thinner, but it may make you happier. Instead of rehashing a past that cannot be changed--feedback--Jon Katzenbach (author of *The Wisdom of Teams*, Harvard Business School Press, 1993) and I coined feedforward to encourage spending time creating a future. In practice, coworkers are taught to ask for suggestions for the future, listen to ideas, and just say thank you. No one is allowed to critique suggestions or to bring up the past.

How many hours of organizational time and productivity are lost in the endless retelling of our coworkers’ blunders? How much internal anger and stress do we generate reliving real or imagined slights? On too many occasions, “team building” feedback exercises degenerate into “Let me tell you what you did wrong” and not “Let me ask you what we can do better.”

An old Buddhist parable illustrates the challenge – and the value – of letting go of the past.

Two monks were strolling by a stream on their way home to the monastery. They were startled by the sound of a young woman in a bridal gown, sitting by the stream, crying softly. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she gazed across the water. She needed to cross to get to her wedding, but she was fearful that doing so might ruin her beautiful handmade gown.

In this particular sect, monks were prohibited from touching women. But one monk was filled with compassion for the bride. Ignoring the sanction, he hoisted the woman on his shoulders and carried her across the stream--assisting her journey and saving her gown. She smiled and bowed with gratitude as he noisily splashed his way back across the stream to rejoin his companion.

The second monk was livid. "How could you do that?" he scolded. "You know we are forbidden even to touch a woman, much less pick one up and carry her around!"

The offending monk listened in silence to a stern lecture that lasted all the way back to the monastery. His mind wandered as he felt the warm sunshine and listened to the singing birds. After returning to the monastery, he fell asleep for a few hours. He was jostled and awakened in the middle of the night by his fellow monk. "How could you carry that woman?" his agitated friend cried out. "Someone else could have helped her across the stream. You were a bad monk!"

"What woman?" the tired monk inquired groggily.

"Don't you even remember? That woman you carried across the stream," his colleague snapped.

"Oh, her," laughed the sleepy monk. "I only carried her across the stream. You carried her all the way back to the monastery."

The learning point is simple: Leave it at the stream.

Have you ever been amazed by a colleague's near-photographic memory of your previous "sins," which have been meticulously catalogued and are then shared with you as part of an ongoing effort to help you improve? How much does this really help?

Try to remember the last time someone told you something that sounded like this: "Let me point

out what you did wrong in the past." How did that make you feel? What happened to the quality of your relationship? Were you more inspired?

Now try to remember the last time you asked someone for suggestions and heard, "Here are some ideas for the future. I hope that some are helpful to you." How did you feel then? What happened to the quality of your relationship? Were you more inspired?

I have watched more than 10,000 leaders practice feedforward. After engaging in this process, I always ask them which words best describe this activity. "Helpful," "great," "useful," and "practical" are often mentioned. And the most commonly mentioned word? "Fun."

What is the last word that you think of when you get feedback about the past? Fun. Remember when a boss called you up and sternly requested, "Why don't you come to my office? I have some feedback for you." I doubt your reaction was a joyous "Sounds like fun."

I am not suggesting that we should always let go of the past. Feedback is sometimes necessary and sometimes useful. However, we can often cover almost all of the same ground by just sharing ideas for the future.

Race-car drivers are taught, "Look at the road ahead." Who knows? Not only may it help you win the race but you'll definitely have a better trip around the track.

**Dr. Marshall Goldsmith** recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.