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Learning from Google's Hiring Practices
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Well, who doesn't know of Google? It was founded in just 1998 but quickly became one of the world's most valuable companies. One wonders where the internet would be, or how we would find directions to a new restaurant, or even if we'd remember our next meeting if there was no Google! All their success begs the question: how have they done what they've done? How have they found such success? One way to answer it is to say the business has been built on innovation, hard-core analytics, and mind-numbing algorithms. But I think a better way to answer the question is to say they have built their success through people. Because that is what every business and organization is ultimately built on. It is built on people.

It might be helpful then to understand just what Google is looking for when they hire someone. What kind of person is it that makes Google succeed? For a number of years, I am not so sure that Google could have answered that question well for themselves, but as the years have gone by they have compiled data on their own employees (with their consent) and in doing so have created a rubric that represents the qualities and characteristics that correlate with success at Google. These qualities and characteristics were revealed last year in an interview between Adam Bryant of *The New York Times* and Laszlo Bock, the Senior Vice President of People Operations for Google.¹ There are five.

The first is what Bock calls the least important. It is expertise. Of course, Google values people with great skills in such technical skills as computing coding. But while these skills are important, they are not all-important for this reason: "If you take somebody who has high cognitive ability, is innately curious, willing to learn and has emergent leadership skills, and . . . you compare them with someone who's been doing just one thing and is a world expert, the expert will go: 'I've seen this 100 times before; here's what you do.'" And, of course, that can be a great hindrance to innovation. The non-expert, more often than not will come up with the same answer as the expert, but in addition they are more likely to come up with something totally new, something that could be of great value.

This makes sense of the second characteristic Google is looking for in new hires, and that is general cognitive ability. While Google may not necessarily be looking for experts, they are looking for people who can “process on the fly” and “pull together disparate pieces of information.” In other words, they are not looking for savants, they are looking for people that can apply their smarts to a wide variety of problems.

The third characteristic is leadership. Google is not looking for people who held leadership roles in the past, but rather they want people who know when to step up and lead and when to step back and let others lead. They want to know if “when faced with a problem and you’re a member of a team, do you, at the appropriate time, step in and lead. And just as critically, do you step back and stop leading, do you let someone else?” This is important to Google because they have found that effective leadership in their environment calls for an understanding of when to relinquish power and the willingness to do so.”

Fourth, Google is looking for a sense of ownership in those they hire. They are not looking for people who are coming to work only to do what they are told and get a paycheck. They are looking for people with a sense of responsibility. They want employees who are willing to help solve problems regardless of where they come from in the company.

Fifth, and finally, they look for humility. That’s right, humility, and by humility they mean “the willingness to step back and embrace the better ideas of others.” That’s the kind of humility that is needed to lead well, but it is also the kind of leadership that is needed to learn well and to find right solutions faster. Bock says, “Without humility, you are unable to learn. . . . What we’ve seen is that the people who are the most successful here, who we want to hire, will have a fierce position. They’ll argue like hell. They’ll be zealots about their point of view. But then you say, ‘here’s a new fact,’ and they’ll go, ‘Oh, well, that changes things; you’re right.’”

Now, I think what Google has learned in regards to all five of these characteristics is valuable, but at least for today, it’s the last characteristic that interests me most. And it interests me most for two reasons. First, because humility fits in line with Jim Collin’s research as presented in his best-selling book *Good to Great*. Collin’s research found that the common attribute of companies that are ridiculously

outstanding in their industry is that they have leaders who are both extraordinarily determined and extraordinarily humble. That is, successful companies are run by people who believe in themselves enough to think that their effort can make a difference and thus are not going to give up even when things go tough. But these same leaders also know there is no way they can accomplish the aims of the company on their own and therefore need to lean heavily on others all along the way. In other words, successful leaders are humble enough to understand that regardless of how hard they work there are a whole lot of things that cannot be accomplished on their own.

The second reason the hiring attribute of humility interests me is because what works in the economy of Google parallels with what works in the economy of God. You see, there is much in the Bible that speaks of being diligent and of not growing weary of doing what is right. And there is good deal that speaks against the person that does not get after it. But apart from calling people to a determination to fulfill certain responsibilities, the Bible is adamant in teaching that there are certain things that can never be accomplished apart from God, and that one needs to be humble enough to recognize that.

In fact, on one occasion Jesus shared a parable that spoke directly to the importance of this kind of humility. The parable went like this:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: extortionists, unrighteous people, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’ The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!’ I tell you that this man went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:10-14)

Now, what is particularly telling to me about this parable is that Jesus is not saying that the praying and the fasting and the clean living of the religious leader is bad; it’s just that it is not determinative when it comes to being right before God. What is determinative when it comes

to being acceptable before God is being willing to recognize that there are limitations to what one can do, and in recognizing those limitations turning to God for what only He can give.

I know that Google is not focused on the principles of Jesus, they are simply looking for what works. They are asking the question: What kind of employee is it that contributes to corporate success? But over the years I have consistently found that when pathways to success are discovered they have a remarkable way of lining up with pathways in the economy of God.

ⁱ Thomas L. Friedman, "How to Get a Job at Google," *New York Times*, February 22, 2104, accessed September 29, 2014, http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google.html?_r=2&referrer=

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