Partnership over Stakeholdership

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When hiring for senior roles, companies put too much stress on stakeholder management skills i.e. ability to navigate through complex stakeholder landscape and manage expectations. I find the ability to form meaningful and impactful partnership a lot more important skill than stakeholdership. So what defines partnership at the workplace and how you use it to hire the people who can create great partnerships and have a long-lasting impact on the course of your company?

Definition

Partnerships form when you have individuals who share the same level of passion, intellectual parity and can collaborate to become a force multiplier. A partnership is what creates successful startups and transform them into highly successful companies. A great partnership can transform struggling companies. For examples, Steve Jobs and Tim Cook forged one of the most highly regarded partnerships in tech history and rescued Apple from its death spiral. Similarly, in cricket (sports), teams performance revolves around match-winning partnerships. It is important to note, individual innings do not become great in isolation. In science, the celebrated partnership between James Watson and Francis Crick helped to solve the mystery of DNA structure.

Intellectual parity

In my career, I have been lucky to have several impactful partnerships. In most cases, people I formed formidable partnership were my peers (such as product directors) or senior executives (such as CDO, CMO), in some cases my director reports (engineering managers, technical leads, architects etc.).

I generally find intellectual parity a key reason why high-calibre individuals come together to form partnerships. For me intellectual parity is demonstrated when two or more people can intellectually converse on the same wavelength, i.e. they can bounce their ideas, thoughts, and create stimulating and passionate dialogues most productively.

Emergent patterns

A great partnership creates emergent interactions and behaviour where the whole impact of a partnership is significantly greater than the sum of individual abilities. Whereas in stakeholdership, every additional stakeholder makes overall impact significantly lower than mathematical sum of their individual abilities. Steven Jobs Stakeholdership is about keeping stakeholders happy and informed.

A partnership is about trust and complimenting each other's capabilities. So in Apple's story, Tim was an operations wizard and supply chain guru who made Apple a manufacturing powerhouse, whereas

Steve was ferociously perfectionist with a great understanding of product and design. Together they created a partnership which multiplied their individual capabilities. Similarly, Watson and Crick were racing against other teams working to determine the structure of DNA but their biggest advantage was how well they complemented each other.

Hire for partnership

My advice - hire people for their ability to form great partnerships. To identify partnership potential, you must involve peers and other key people in the hiring process. More importantly, ask yourself if tomorrow you are starting a new company will you hire the person as co-founder. During interview process, ask candidates to provide examples of impactful partnerships in their professional career.