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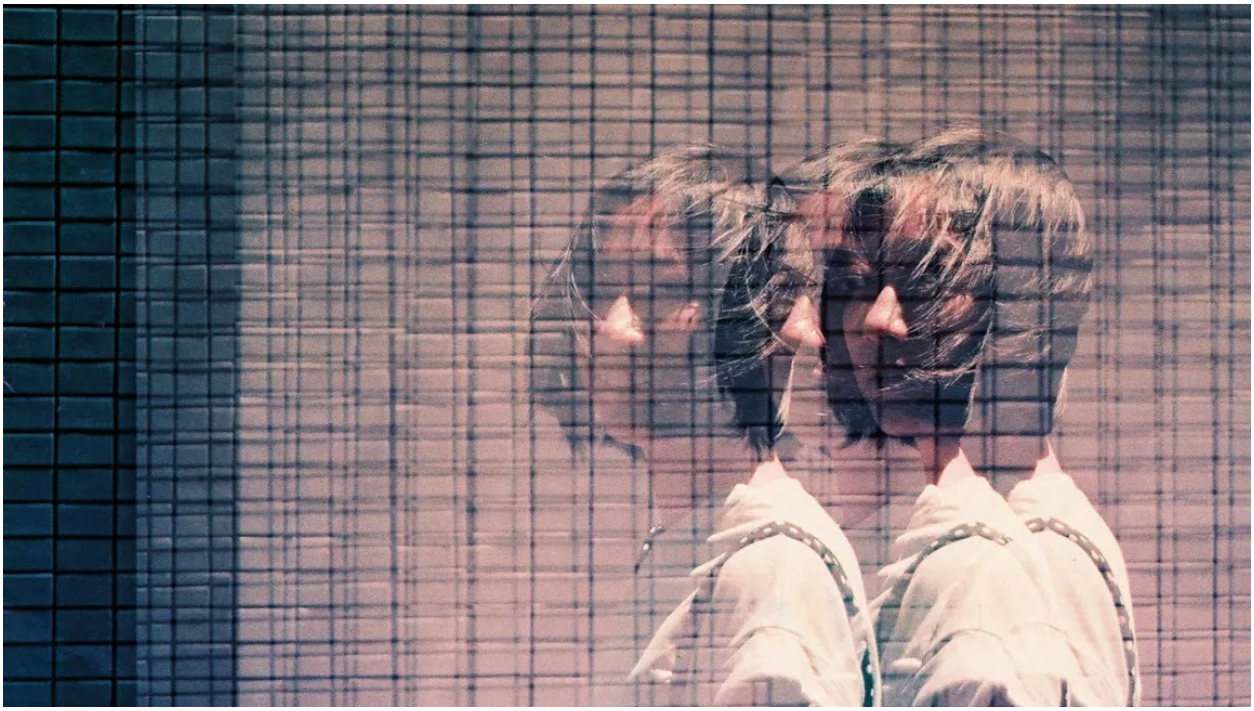
Why You Overrate High Performance At Work (And What It's Costing You)

Moral character is our main measure for judging other people in virtually every area of our lives but one: at work.



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BY DAVID MAYER

It's been a little while since you broke up with your ex, and now you're ready to start dating again. You tell yourself you're going to do it all differently. You want someone who's both a good person (honest, trustworthy, compassionate) and smart (competent, skilled, quick to solve problems).

You want someone with *all* those qualities, of course–but what if you had to settle for more of one set than the other? Which would you prefer?

If that question seems a little ridiculous when it comes to our personal lives, it's one that's often answered for us at work. Sometimes we find ourselves working for a hapless boss who's a good-hearted person, and sometimes for a high-performing asshole. It's easy for companies to fire (or just not promote) someone who isn't especially skilled.

It's a lot harder to hold back competent employees who may have an unethical streak. Many eventually become leaders, perpetuating the tendency in the business world to value performance more highly than values. What are we losing anything in that compromise? And does it matter?

HOW WE JUDGE OTHERS IN WORK AND LIFE

Researchers have found that most of us are eager to judge other people, no matter the domains in life where we encounter them. And according to research by Amy Cuddy, Susan Fiske, and Peter Glick, the two main dimensions by which we we evaluate them are morality (some scholars call this "warmth," with *morality* being one component and sociability the other) and competence.

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It turns out that one tends to matter more than the other depending on which type of situation we're in. In our personal relationships, character trumps competence, according to a series of studies by the researcher Bogdan Wojciske.

This makes sense: We want to know we can trust the people we make ourselves vulnerable to in our intimate relationships. In fact, recent research by Geoffrey Goodwin, Jared Piazza, and Paul Rozin finds that moral character is our primary measure for sizing up other people in *most* of our interactions–not just romantic relationships–with one important exception: work.

It's there that the findings flip. Competence becomes the main currency, and character takes a back seat. Some research I've conducted with Karl Aquino, Mary Mawritz, and Manuela Priesemuth finds that a high-performing leader who engaged in a variety of ethical transgressions both in and out of work was respected and admired more than a lower-performing leader who was a highly ethical person.

That's because, in general, employees depend on their colleagues and bosses for their own and their organizations' success, making them value skills more than sincerity. Wojciszke has discovered a similar "competence first, morality second" pattern in specific business situations like negotiating.

WELL, SO WHAT?

But does that matter?

It's not a strictly philosophical question: When you read a job applicant's resume, chances are you look first for their skills and focus less on piecing together their character. At speaking events, you're drawn in by a speaker's ideas and don't stop to consider whether they're a decent human being. When your company's CEO addresses the staff about what's in store for the year ahead, the main thing you're listening for is whether those plans will boost the company's growth, not so much their impact in bettering the world.

In each of these situations, there are clear reasons for prioritizing high performance. You have certain goals, and homing in on tactical plans and capabilities is the surest way to meet them. There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to be around highly effective, successful people. They can inspire us to be more effective. They generally work hard. They often help our organizations. But as the *Times* columnist David Brooks writes in his book *The Road to Character*, focusing too much on competence and not enough on character can be dangerous.

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In his view, there are two sets of virtues: "résumé virtues" that focus on skills or competence, and "eulogy virtues," about morality and character. Brooks argues that while we may genuinely care more about eulogy virtues, we're too often seduced by résumé virtues, perhaps owing to the barrage of achievement-related messages modern society churns out.

And indeed, Wojciszke finds that while we evaluate others on a moral scale, we tend to size up ourselves based on competence. Success–in our most personal definitions of it–is more about what you do than who you are.

HOW TO STAKE LESS ON PERFORMANCE

In order to avoid falling victim to the perils of overrating performance at work, here are a few questions to ask:

What am I overlooking as a result? By fixating on competence above all else, you risk hiring and promoting the wrong type of employee. Research suggests that highly competent people may be more likely to fall victim to biases that make them less ethical–which could pose real threats to the company. And it can incentivize bad behaviors from employees trying to move up in the organization. That can do real damage to company culture, especially if team members catch on that only high performers get a free pass when it comes to being principled.

Is it self-defeating? Reaching your professional potential is a noble goal as long as you know *why* that matters to you. As Brooks points out, most people would ultimately prefer to be described as a good person than a competent person at the end of their lives. Too much ambition can lead to a path that's out of sync with the things you care most about.

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What are my basic principles, and what are my company's? An influential book by Bob Sutton called *The No Asshole Rule* makes a compelling case for why hiring toxic individuals–no matter how high performing–can have disastrous effects. Character matters. Consider which would make you *prouder*, if not more successful: being a part of an organization where people have integrity or where they're mainly bullies and petty tyrants?

In business, should we value the head or the heart more highly? It shouldn't be an either/or proposition, and it seldom is. But it remains true that competence gets most people further in the business world more often–and that deserves some reexamining. As Nelson Mandela put it, "A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination."