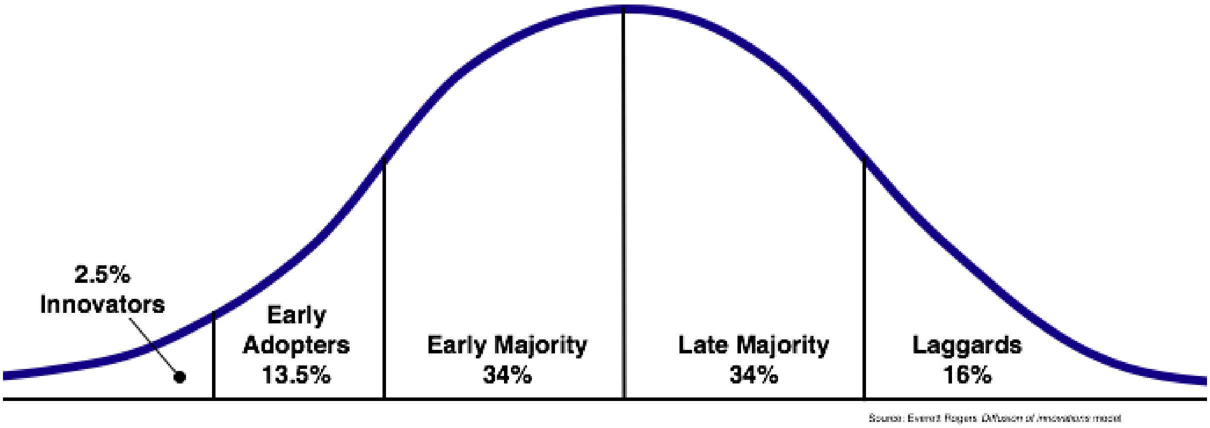
For Whom The Bell Tolls

~ The deadly effects of the bell curve on the concept and practice of leadership development and sustainment in business, and what can be done about it ~

I often ask participants at workshops I conduct whether they have gone to school, and this of course is greeted with cynical laughter, as participants give me the look of "Ok, so what's next?" Of course we've all gone to school, we're all products of our society. If you are reading this and have not been to school, you have come to live in a very different society indeed! Our experiences in school have shaped us and the ideas we have gotten stay with us to either buoy us jubilantly upwards or haunt us, depending on what they were, how we imbibed them, and how we have responded to these ideas.



Ernest Hemingway of course echoes the sentiment that the bell "…tolls for thee." Grading on the curve, assuming that a bell-shaped normal distribution demonstrates that an exam or similar apparatus best demonstrates who the "best students" are in any particular cohort, has been widely accepted as being a best practice. There are those that promote it, and there are those that oppose it[1]. I think that there is much more acceptance of this practice than there is opposition to it. Also, it seems to me that the concept of grading on the curve has found its way into the business world and business leaders are applying the concept both knowingly and unknowingly.

Proponents of grading on the curve say that it encourages excellence in performance by encouraging competition for scarce "A"s and promotions or other career development opportunities. In other words, it's "up" or "out". Another reason given is that it prevents false inflation of scores, meaning falsely giving credit where none was due. When it comes to large numbers, this of course is true. However, when we are dealing with smaller groups comprising highly motivated, well-trained and extremely capable people, "grading on the curve" might actually run contrary to what we would want to achieve, which happens to developing and motivating people to do their best, more for the love of their work, and not for more remuneration or promotion alone. What if you run a difficult test, one that exceeds the requirements

[1] You can refer to http://bit.ly/PuXrCW and http://bit.ly/VoG09V for views on why grading on the curve is not likely to be the best thing.

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of that particular aspect of your industry, and 50% of your people taking the test end up with perfect scores? Grading on a normal distribution would not be the answer! Do that, and you might find yourself staring at the dust raised by departing feet! It seems that many organizations continue to either consciously or unconsciously apply grading that would fit a normal distribution pattern regardless of situation or context. Sadly, much of this is left to an HR setup run by household servants instead of a vibrant, strategic HR Business Unit. That is the subject of another article.

So, what can we do to counter the effects of grading on the curve? Not in making the tests more difficult, certainly, although in a few cases that might actually be what is required. There is no one answer, but you might find the following useful in erasing the effects of "grading on the curve" that has gone deep into our collective psyche. Even if you run a large MNC employing thousands of people worldwide, I would suggest that if your performance results do match a normal distribution, you look at the results from a strategic direction viewpoint rather than simply from a people development viewpoint.

1. What and where are the new growth areas?

If the percentages of high performers keep rising, it is an indicator that new Business Units might need to be formed. If the nature of your business is more of a focused, narrow-band sort, for example, "Pharmaceuticals", you might need to increase scope and capacity by expanding into "Healthcare" or "Noble Living" or similar things. If you are a conglomerate dealing with many things under the sun, you have the option of "farming out" some areas of the business which are not related directly, but which can be supportive in nature. High-performing staff can then be encouraged to join the new enterprise, whose growth would actually be complementary to yours. For example, if you deal in food products as well as organic fuels, you might want to spin off the organic fuels part of the house and focus on foods. This would then allow both entities to grow more quickly. There can also be cross-posting arrangements between the two, since many skills acquired by high performers would be quite portable and highly desirable by both.

2. Recognize that people are Living Things.

That may sound a bit silly to you, but I encourage you to stop and think about it for a while. Living things grow and reproduce. When living things cease to grow and reproduce, death is on the way. You can argue about bacterial spores able to remain dormant for years, but I think you get the point. In a large organization I know of, one of the instruments used in performance evaluations was this highly-nebulous thing called "Currently Estimated Potential". It was commonly referred to as "Career End Point". Theoretically, a leader was supposed to evaluate this portion of the appraisal by taking into account current performance, evidence of professional growth, areas of interest, areas of demonstrated competencies, and then estimate where the juxtaposition of these traits might lead to in five, ten, fifteen years' time.

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However, the Philosophy of Convenience being a dominant philosophy at the time, titles and appointments were arbitrarily assigned by those conducting the performance reviews, with absolutely no basis for those conclusions beyond seat-of-the-pants type judgments. Moreover, the time frame for those appraisals was often nothing more than the current year, with no consideration for the overall growth of that individual from previous years and so forth. Remember, your people are living things. You must provide conditions for them to grow and reproduce themselves. When you do so, you will find no shortages for your proverbial leadership pipeline!

3. <u>Recognize that there are two aspects to education and development.</u>

I am talking about developing deep, well-rounded fundamentals of character, leadership qualities and core technical competencies that would be of immense value to your organization. That is the core foundation of people development in your organization.

The second aspect has to do with more specialized competencies that *most*, if not all, of your people will be good at, but which only *some* of your people will be great at. If I have fingers that look like a bunch of bananas, I might be able to play the piano rather well if I practice 18 hours a day, but I probably would not be as good as a Benjamin Zander, Charles Curry or other great pianist. Remember, though, that along the way, there have very likely been any number of Benjamin Zanders, Charles Currys and many other great musicians that probably fell by the wayside after being “graded on the curve”, eventually going on to becoming second-best at something else or were simply swallowed up in the Auschwitz-like maws of hopeless depression, going to extinction with their music still in them.

Do note that while focusing on the “talents” is indeed much more glamorous, your real work lies in providing for solid foundational development for all your people. Only then will there be a stream of maestros emerging from the pulsating life-mass, each joyously supporting the other.

So, remember, the bell-shaped normal distribution curve is not always the “norm”. Do you want to be the “norm”? Invest your resources in developing your people to the fullest. Be generous with them and they will become a generous people. Only then will you not have to dread asking for whom the bell tolls. In its place will be the merry chimes of the celebration of life.

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