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**"Somebody out there thinks you're an idiot. Somebody out there thinks you're brilliant. Ignore them both and carry on." » Jack Butcher**

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## Not a Flattering Look

I ran across a column recently that had me reflecting on many past conversations with managers about "office politics."

The column by Arianne Cohen for Fast Company is entitled, "Psychologists have finally figured out why your toxic colleagues climb to the top at work."

At the core of their findings is that these "climbers" achieve their goals primarily through social skills. They use charm, flattery, etc. to attain high job performance reviews from superiors.

In the researchers' terms, toxic personalities are characterized by low honesty and low modesty. (Psychological terms, it seems, can be pretty harsh.)

Okay, I don't believe I ever referred to the folks I've called attention to as "toxic."

But I have pointed out to leaders over the years that some people – in my humble opinion – seem to "climb the ladder" by mastering the art of self-promotion.

Now, I'm not suggesting that a little self-promotion is a bad thing.

Yet, problems may surface when employees (at any level) prioritize impressing their superiors over serving customers or contributing effectively to the team.

And while some employees may be more prone to this behavior than others, I propose that it only succeeds if leaders allow it.

## A Fighting Chance

Occasionally, I engage in lively discussions with one or both of my sons, which I wish were recorded.

This isn't because these chats demonstrate profound intelligence, as much as they revolve around topics that most folks wouldn't believe anyone would spend time on.

One such conversation recently sprang up at the dinner table.

I don't remember how we headed down the rabbit trail we were on, but it led to my son asking, "So, you probably think Bruce Lee could actually beat Kareem Abdul Jabbar in a fight?"

When I told him, yes, I'd bet the house on Bruce Lee, he burst out laughing, "You're just saying that to be annoying. You don't believe that."

He began talking about their incredible size disparities and even looked them up on his phone.

In his prime, Jabbar was 7'2" and weighed 225 lbs. Bruce Lee was 5'7" and 145 lbs.

He continued, "Game over. He's too big. Lee only beat him in that movie because he was the star!"

I laughed and said, "The only reason the fight lasted as long as it did is because it was pretend. In real life, Bruce Lee takes him out in about 30 seconds."

(Yes, this was a real conversation.)

It's hard to fault self-promoters if they see that the way to security and a better career lies more in currying the favor of a boss than in producing results that strengthen teams and grow businesses.

No leader at any level wants to think they are favoring certain individuals for nonproductive reasons or allowing internal politics to undermine team morale.

Yet, some may unconsciously find themselves in bubbles that allow that to happen.

Everyone you interact with daily is nice (or at least polite). No one pushes back on even your less-thought-out suggestions.

Folks keep bad news from you. It feels like a great place to be!

But it's a bubble. It's seldom reality and it tends to lead to blind spots.

Irrespective of your current (or future) leadership role, remain diligent in preventing environments where only selected viewpoints, data, (or people) are allowed to actually reach you.

Regularly seek out the thoughts and opinions of reliable team members who don't seem to speak much.

They usually have observations worth hearing.

Tuned in leaders build stronger teams.

After a few more quips, I suggested that one guy's obvious size advantage would be next to impossible to overcome in a multitude of competitions.

But we weren't talking about those.

I proposed that a smaller, better-prepared competitor wouldn't confront a goliath where the giant's advantages were clear.

Lee wouldn't play on his home court. He'd beat Jabbar in areas and with methods that played to his own strengths.

Sensing yet another chance to play consultant with my young banker son, I compared our (somewhat ridiculous) discussion to the real-world competition between banks.

On paper, you'd expect that massive banks had overwhelming advantages over much smaller financial institutions.

And sure, in some areas they might.

It's why non-goliath banks need to know what their individual strengths are, where they stand out, and what can differentiate them in the eyes of customers.

If you constantly work on showing customers – in word and action – what you bring to the table that bigger players can't (or won't), you'll be competing on your home court.

When that happens, I'll bet on the home team more often than not.

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**"Give me 100 percent. You can't make up for a poor effort today by giving 110 percent tomorrow. You don't have 110 percent. You only have 100 percent, and that's what I need from you right now."**

**» John Wooden**

*Dave Martin, author of The In-Store Advantage, has become one of the most prolific writers in the banking industry. His keynote presentations, seminars, and podcasts have an authenticity and humor that brings teams of all sizes and seniority levels together.*

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