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MEAN PEOPLE FAIL

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It struck me recently how few of the most successful people I know are mean. There are exceptions, but remarkably few.

Meanness isn't rare. In fact, one of the things the internet has shown us is how mean people can be. A few decades ago, only famous people and professional writers got to publish their opinions. Now everyone can, and we can all see the long tail of meanness that had previously been hidden.

And yet while there are clearly a lot of mean people out there, there are next to none among the most successful people I know. What's going on here? Are meanness and success inversely correlated?

Part of what's going on, of course, is selection bias. I only know people who work in certain fields: startup founders, programmers, professors. I'm willing to believe that successful people in other fields are mean. Maybe successful hedge fund managers are mean; I don't know enough to say. It seems quite likely that most successful drug lords are mean. But there are at least big chunks of the world that mean people don't rule, and that territory seems to be growing.

My wife and Y Combinator cofounder Jessica is one of those rare people who have x-ray vision for character. Being married to her is like standing next to an airport baggage scanner. She came to the startup world from investment banking, and she has always been struck both by how consistently successful startup founders turn out to be good people, and how consistently bad people fail as startup founders.

Why? I think there are several reasons. One is that being mean makes you stupid. That's why I hate fights. You never do your best work in a fight, because fights are not sufficiently general. Winning is always a function of the situation and the people involved. You don't win fights by thinking of big ideas but by thinking of tricks that work in one particular case. And yet fighting is just as much work as thinking about real problems. Which is particularly painful to someone who cares how their brain is used: your brain goes fast but you get nowhere, like a car spinning its wheels.

Startups don't win by attacking. They win by transcending. There are exceptions of course, but usually the way to win is to race ahead, not to stop and fight.

Another reason mean founders lose is that they can't get the best people to work for them. They can hire people who will put up

with them because they need a job. But the best people have other options. A mean person can't convince the best people to work for him unless he is super convincing. And while having the best people helps any organization, it's critical for startups.

There is also a complementary force at work: if you want to build great things, it helps to be driven by a spirit of benevolence. The startup founders who end up richest are not the ones driven by money. The ones driven by money take the big acquisition offer that nearly every successful startup gets en route. [1] The ones who keep going are driven by something else. They may not say so explicitly, but they're usually trying to improve the world. Which means people with a desire to improve the world have a natural advantage. [2]

The exciting thing is that startups are not just one random type of work in which meanness and success are inversely correlated. This kind of work is the future.

For most of history success meant control of scarce resources. One got that by fighting, whether literally in the case of pastoral nomads driving hunter-gatherers into marginal lands, or metaphorically in the case of Gilded Age financiers contending with one another to assemble railroad monopolies. For most of history, success meant success at zero-sum games. And in most of them meanness was not a handicap but probably an advantage.

That is changing. Increasingly the games that matter are not zero-sum. Increasingly you win not by fighting to get control of a scarce resource, but by having new ideas and building new things. [3]

There have long been games where you won by having new ideas. In the third century BC, Archimedes won by doing that. At least until an invading Roman army killed him. Which illustrates why this change is happening: for new ideas to matter, you need a certain degree of civil order. And not just not being at war. You also need to prevent the sort of economic violence that nineteenth century magnates practiced against one another and communist countries practiced against their citizens. People need to feel that what they create can't be stolen. [4]

That has always been the case for thinkers, which is why this trend began with them. When you think of successful people from history who weren't ruthless, you get mathematicians and writers and artists. The exciting thing is that their m.o. seems to be spreading. The games played by intellectuals are leaking into the real world, and this is reversing the historical polarity of the relationship between meanness and success.

So I'm really glad I stopped to think about this. Jessica and I have always worked hard to teach our kids not to be mean. We tolerate noise and mess and junk food, but not meanness. And now I have both an additional reason to crack down on it, and an additional argument to use when I do: that being mean makes you fail.

Notes

[1] I'm not saying all founders who take big acquisition offers are driven only by money, but rather that those who don't aren't. Plus one can have benevolent motives for being driven by money — for example, to take care of one's family, or to be free to work on projects that improve the world.

[2] It's unlikely that every successful startup improves the world. But their founders, like parents, truly believe they do. Successful founders are in love with their companies. And while this sort of love is as blind as the love people have for one another, it is genuine.

[3] [Peter Thiel](#) would point out that successful founders still get rich from controlling monopolies, just monopolies they create rather than ones they capture. And while this is largely true, it means a big change in the sort of person who wins.

[4] To be fair, the Romans didn't mean to kill Archimedes. The Roman commander specifically ordered that he be spared. But he got killed in the chaos anyway.

In sufficiently disordered times, even thinking requires control of scarce resources, because living at all is a scarce resource.

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