

**Talent Management**

## **Why I Decided to Rethink Hiring Smart People**

by Roger L. Martin

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Chris Argyris' "Teaching Smart People How To Learn" utterly changed the way I thought about management. It didn't just give me a somewhat different view; it convinced me of the exact opposite of what I had believed before I'd read it. That's a heck of a lot of influence for 10 and a half pages!

At the time, I was a director at the strategy consulting firm Monitor, and a few months before the article was published in the May-June 1991 issue, we had formed a four-person Global Executive Committee to run the firm, so I was more intimately involved in its management than I had ever been before.

We had a pretty simple recruiting philosophy during our swift ramp-up from inception in 1983 to that point in time: hire super smart consultants because, thanks to their great intellect, they will be able to learn best and fastest. In fact, we had a thoroughly obnoxious catchphrase — stupid is forever — that I am very embarrassed ever existed, and repeating it here is part of my penance for once holding the view. Its (deeply flawed) logic was that you could teach someone

all the interpersonal skills necessary as long as they were really smart. But if they weren't really smart to begin with, there was nothing you could do.

We were a Harvard Business School shop in the early days and, having great respect for Baker Scholars (the top 5% of the HBS class), we hired as many of them as we could. But they didn't work out nearly as well as we expected, and some flamed out pretty spectacularly. As is often the case, we attributed that to flawed execution of a fundamentally awesome theory — we had just hired the wrong super smart people.

Then I read “Teaching Smart People How To Learn,” which argued trenchantly and compellingly that really smart people have the hardest time learning. They are so very smart that they are also very “brittle,” to use Argyris's descriptor. When something goes wrong, rather than reflect on what they might have done to contribute to the error, they look entirely outside themselves for the causes and blame outside forces — irrational clients, impossible time pressure, lack of adequate resources, shifts beyond their control. Rather than learn from error, they doom themselves to repeat them.

Before reading the article, I would have been inclined to finish that last sentence with “despite being so very smart.” After the article, my conclusion was “*because* they are so very smart.” I personally changed my philosophy and worried a lot more about “smart is forever” than the opposite, and we at Monitor changed how we recruited and developed ever after.

The article had another positive knock-on effect for me, which added to its already great influence: It got me thinking about other assumed unalloyed goods. We had, for instance, assumed that “smartness” — in Monitor's case defined as analytical brilliance — was an unalloyed good. If Tom had a smartness rating of 10 and Sally was a 12, then she was just plain better. And if Jorge was a 15, he was better still. There was no downside to more of this obviously meritorious attribute, so just get more.

Of course, the faults of this reasoning are hardly news — we have an ancient expression which holds that “too much of a good thing may not be such a good thing” — but the article really brought that home to me in the business context. More time to do a client’s project just might not be a good thing. A bigger consulting team for a given project might not be a good thing. Higher client billings might not be a good thing. More offices might not be a good thing. More consultants might not be a good thing.

Since reading the article, I have looked more critically at every unalloyed good in my world. I transformed how I consulted, how I built client relationships, how I managed the aspects of Monitor I ran, and how I have led the Rotman School as dean. It has made me better at what I do — my thanks to Chris Argyris and “Teaching Smart People How to Learn.”

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