

Difficult But Top Notch

July 9, 2020

It's the job you can't fill. It's a tough job. The position has been vacant for a long time. It's logistically far from any other location and the person will be isolated. It is a key place in your strategy and part of your performance review depends upon filling that role. None of your current team members want to move there.

You've been given a name. You're not sure. You don't know him, but he has a reputation. He is a strong performer, but there are concerns. You call the reference and say, "I'm going to give you a name and I'd like your thoughts." You give the name and the response is, "He's difficult but top notch." What do you do?

The best person I ever hired was also the most difficult person I ever hired; and I wish I'd had ten of him.

The first time we met he was – to put it kindly - less than warm. I was put off and immediately thought "this is going to be a short interview." But within twenty minutes my attitude had completely changed. There was something special about him that made him unique; something different, that alluded to potential greatness.

He was difficult. He challenged everything I said. He disagreed with me about everything. Many times, over the next twelve months, I wondered if it was the right decision to hire him.

He was "damaged goods," but so was I. He had been beaten up in his last job and so had I. He was angry with the world and taking it out on me. He was exhausting. He required a lot of time. Healing. So did I. Fortunately I was in a place where I had a lot of time.

He also became the best Area Director in the country, built the best region, impacted more kids, raised more money and became one of my best friends. Difficult but top notch. I wish I'd had ten of him.

Easy is rarely great. If you only surround yourself with easy people you will probably surround yourself with mediocracy. Easy doesn't win.

I once had a CEO tell me about his top salesperson. He described the individual as a complete pain in the ass. He told me that if the guy wasn't producing great sales numbers he would be fired. But that's not all. He told me that as soon as his numbers dropped, he would fire him. He was almost rooting for the guy to fail so he could fire him and be rid of this difficult person.

He was counseling me to not be that guy. Don't be the guy people want to fire because you are difficult. It sounded like good advice and I tried to process it. But looking back, many years later, that CEO presided over the collapse of his company. It didn't surprise me. He couldn't wait to get rid of his top performer. Of course, the company didn't make it! A company of easy people will become a company with easy results, easy excuses and easy demise. Eventually, an organization with easy people will become an organization of no people.

Most of the best performers are difficult. Think of any myriad of sport stars and you know the best are difficult. Think Reggie Jackson or Tom Brady. Difficult but top notch. Or think of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Churchill, Hoover, FDR or Truman. All difficult.

Harry Truman was called "Give 'em hell Harry," and he once famously said, "I don't give them Hell, I tell them the truth and they think it's Hell." Yes, he was difficult.

The difficult are driven by something that is deep inside of them. They know they can be great but the "inner demons" haunt them. They lash out. They offend. They are demanding. And they produce.

The challenge of a great leader is to get the difficult but top-notch people to a place of excelling while helping them kill the inner demons that cause them to be "difficult."

It takes time, patience and great coaching to get the best out of difficult but top-notch people and heal what makes them difficult. Mostly it takes time. In a world where time is our most precious commodity, the true cost of putting together the best team is the time it takes to invest in the difficult but top-notch people.

But is there a necessary correlation? Do the best have to be difficult? Can there also be the Kurt Warners and Carson Wentzs? The Reagans and Ws"? Yes, but they are the exceptions. I reflect back on the biographies that I've read of great leaders over the last ten years. There are only a few who were

not difficult. Reagan was opposed by his political adversaries but not known as difficult. W was not a difficult person. All the others? Difficult.

It's no coincidence that Warner, Wentz, Regan and Bush also have an inner spiritual peace. Werner banged around in Arena Football and got to a place of peace with himself. Wentz went to a less-than college and seems comfortable in his own skin; time will tell. Reagan had been in Hollywood, and as Peggy Noonan said, "He wasn't impressed with Washington. After all he had kissed Lana Turner." W wrestled with his alcoholism and got peace with his inner self before he entered politics. And in each case, they all had/have a deep faith in something beyond themselves.

You can be top notch without being difficult, but it begins with being at peace with yourself.

Personally:

1. What are the inner demons that are keeping you from becoming top notch without being difficult?
2. Who will invest the time with you to help you become the best of who you are?
3. What does inner peace look like?

As a leader:

1. Who are your best people?
2. Who are your most difficult people?
3. Who can be top notch if you invest in them?
4. What happens if you don't?

What does it mean to invest in another person?

I've spent a lifetime doing it, and I'd love the opportunity to help you with your "difficult but top notch" people. Contact me (bob@bobperkinsconsulting.com) to discuss how I can help you and your best performers -

Know Who You Are And Be It!