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SEVEN WAYS TO COMBAT OVERVALUATION AND INSULAR ELITISM



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Albert Einstein is a fascinating case study in the overvaluation of ideas and the dangers of insular elitism. He constantly challenged the status quo and was on the wrong side of the academic elite in his field of study. His early attempts at submitting a doctoral dissertation were rebuffed because his ideas represented an attack on the scientific establishment. When we reflect on Einstein's experiences it is tempting to believe our ability to spot talent, and engage mavericks is better than the scientific community of his day and we would never marginalize a paradigm-busting pioneer. That is a dangerous assumption.

Graduating from university and entering the "real world" of the job market can be a challenging season of transition, all the more so when the job market is stressed. Even the brightest students recognize the importance of a wide and well connected network in landing a job. I came across an interesting letter written by a father on behalf of his discouraged son:

Please forgive a father who is so bold as to turn to you...in the interest of his son. [He] is 22 years old...and...passed his exam with flying colors last summer. Since then he has been trying unsuccessfully to get a position as a teaching assistant, which would enable



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him to continue his education. All those in a position to judge praise his talents; I can assure you that he is extraordinarily studious and diligent. He therefore feels profoundly unhappy about his current lack of a job, and he becomes more and more convinced that he has gone off the tracks with his career. It is to you I am turning with the humble request to read his paper and to write him, if possible, a few words of encouragement, so that he might recover his joy in living and working. If you could secure him an assistant's position, my gratitude would know no bounds. Forgive me for my impudence in writing you, and my son does not know anything about my unusual step.²⁰

There is nothing remarkable about this letter on the surface but I was drawn to it because it was written in 1901 by Albert Einstein's father to a professor his son admired most. The professor never even answered the letter. Describing his desperate search for a position Albert Einstein said, "I will soon have graced every physicist from the North Sea to the southern tip of Italy with my offer."²¹ He even sent postage paid self addressed post cards with his inquiries believing a rejection notice would be better than no response at all. No wonder his father felt compelled to intervene.

Einstein's journey is a fascinating case study in the overvaluation of ideas and the dangers of insular elitism. He constantly challenged the status quo thinking of the day and found himself on the wrong side of the academic elite in his field of study. His early attempts at submitting a doctoral dissertation were rebuffed because his ideas represented an attack on the scientific establishment. This is the proverbial good ole boys club on steroids.

When we reflect on Einstein's experiences it is tempting to believe our ability to spot talent, and engage mavericks is better than others and our organization or field of study would never marginalize a paradigm-busting pioneer. That is a dangerous assumption. In the previous chapter I shared how overvaluation stifles innovation. In this chapter I want to build on those ideas with seven ways to combat insular elitism and overvaluation.

Openly and Repeatedly Embrace Humility

The most combustible fuel for overvaluation and elitism is pride. A small amount of it can start a raging fire. The most important way to combat elitism is to embrace humility, openly and repeatedly. I do this with our team and in other settings by repeating a powerful statement I heard from a well respected national speaker at a meeting I attended a few years ago at Yale University. He began his talk by saying, “I have come to realize that I don’t have all the answers. In fact, some of the answers I do have are wrong; I just don’t know which ones. As it becomes clear I’ll change them.” When you admit in advance that some of the ideas driving your activity are wrong and when you discover which ones you will change them, you make a powerful statement to the people around you.

Court Your Ideas Before You Marry Them

One of the challenges leaders face when it comes to creativity is they often have the power to implement their ideas without vetting them first. We are easily swept off our feet by our own ideas and tempted to marry them immediately. That makes it harder for leaders to maintain appropriate emotional distance and effectively shuts down the critical evaluation process.

When I share new ideas with a focus group I purposefully resist the temptation to create a power point slide deck or white paper document because I believe the more formal your presentation the less candid the feedback. People will assume you have already bought in to the idea and are not all that open to change, especially if there is even a modest power distance between the presenter and the group. Save your fancy presentation for your meeting with donors; keep it simple with the focus group.

Mine For Gold at the Fringe

In many cases the seeds of creativity and fresh thinking you need to go to the next level are already being worked on at the edges of your field of study. Find those pockets on the edge and engage them. Look for the early adopters and risk takers; find out what they are doing and what they plan to do next. Often these fringe dwellers have been burned by the power brokers of their field of study and may well be

skeptical of your motives. That's why the first point I made is so important, embrace humility openly and repeatedly.

Democratize Creativity And Problem Solving

In his brilliant book, *Y-Size Your Business*, Jason Dorsey explains how some companies have developed a brainstorming wall in high traffic employee only areas where they post actual problems they are facing or strategic decisions they are considering but have yet to resolve. They invite anyone to contribute a solution, pose a question, add information or reframe the conversation. Each contributor dates and signs the comments so recognition and rewards can be given to those whose ideas contributed most to the issue at hand.

Cultivate an Appetite for Learning Outside Your Expertise

Find some regular sources of intellectual stimulation that widen your learning circle and force you to engage with unfamiliar ideas. For me that means reading *Fast Company*, *WIRED* and *Harvard Business Review* on a consistent basis. I record Fareed Zakaria's GPS program and almost always download the sample of the book he recommends on my Kindle. Watch a TED talk every few weeks; go to a conference outside your field of study once a year. Find ways to shake up your learning and experiences that force you to think differently.

Become an Intentional Steward of Your Knowledge Base

You have probably heard the statement, none of us is as smart as all of us. The problem we face is bigger than not having information, it is not having access to information we already have. There is a difference. To become a steward of your knowledge base you have to develop effective ways for your team to share what they are learning from each other and interacting with grass roots constituents about how to improve your methods and systems.

Cultivate Grace-Awakened Contrarianism

If you are on record admitting some of your ideas are wrong, you just don't know which ones, you have

given implicit permission for people to challenge the status quo. Don't "villianize" them for doing so. Create forums where people can ask hard questions and deconstruct traditions without being branded as rebellious or insubordinate. Hold them to standards of civility and grace without eliminating their ability to color outside the lines.

Though not always grace-awakened, one of Einstein's strong suits was his contrarian mindset. One of his credos was "Blind respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth."²² His boss at the patent office encouraged him to remain critically vigilant, to question every premise, challenge conventional wisdom, and never accept something merely because everyone else views it as obvious.

In 1900, the year before Einstein's father wrote on his behalf seeking a teaching appointment for his son, the revered scientist Lord Kelvin told the British Association for the Advancement of Science, "There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now, all that remains is more and more precise measurement." Just five years later, over a four month period from March to June of 1905, Albert Einstein, a 26 year old patent clerk, wrote four papers that would change the world of physics forever. It would later be described as the "miracle year." He had the brashness needed to scrub away the layers of conventional wisdom and the imagination required to make conceptual leaps that eluded traditional thinkers.

I'm praying that the Great Commission community in general and your church or mission in particular will fight off the inertia of elitism and insular thinking to make space for the break through ideas we desperately need at this critical moment in the history of the church. Which of the seven ideas for overcoming insular elitism in this chapter should you prioritize now? Where are the idea mavericks in your organization? Invite them to audit your culture and offer suggestions for improvement. What steps could you take to democratize your problem solving?

NOTES

²⁰ Walter Isaacson, *Einstein* (Simon & Shuster, 2007) Kindle location 1331

²¹ Ibid, Kindle location 1303

²² Ibid, Kindle location 1451

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