

The Committee Pig (and relatives)

PIG: At the Wisconsin State Fair, I watched the pig judging. The sole judge (who kind of looked like a pig with a cane) was judging all the pigs in the competition and had several excellent comments about each pig. He was a pig farmer from Iowa. Afterwards, I asked him why there was only one judge. He said that around 1900, animals used to be judged by a committee of local farmers. This led to local politics and an average pig being selected as the winner. The fair then decided to bring in outside judges who did not know any of the local farmers. One year, the judge would judge on the ribs; the next year, the judge emphasized the ham, and so forth. The winner was then selected to provide breeding for future piglets. Pretty soon, the local farmers discovered that their pigs were getting bigger, healthier and more profitable. Since then, most all major animal judging has been done by a single person from outside the area. That person does not judge the same competition again. It turned out that the committee pig was a loss for everyone concerned.

HIRE: When I was working in the aerospace industry, we interviewed potential new employees, either individually (poor) or as a group (better). During an individual interview, the prospect would talk to about five staff members for half-hour each. Each staff member would then fill out a form on the candidate. There was a candidate named "Paul". Four people, including the top two managers, thought he was acceptable. One staff member, "Bob", wrote on the form: "Absolutely do not hire this person". Since the vote was four to one and the hiring manager was on the majority, "Paul" was hired. As it turned out, he was given two tasks. When asked to do anything, he was always busy on the other task. He always asked a lot of questions, and needed help completing any assignment, thereby draining effort from other more important tasks. When he left the company in six months, his web of deception was uncovered. "Bob" was incensed; he had stated his opinion from the start and was absolutely right. He then refused to do any more interviews since he correctly felt that his opinion did not matter. He also subsequently left the company to successfully work for himself.

SCIENCE: Richard Feynman (Caltech Physics Prof) once said: "What do you care about what other people think?". Winners of Nobel prizes come up with ideas that are hard to believe and would not necessarily pass a vote of people, or even fellow scientists. However, science is not about voting, but providing experiments and methodology to prove concepts. When there are science problems at work, having a consensus of participants is a better choice than having a vote of participants. I really dislike being the sole negative vote (correctly) on an issue. Two NASA space shuttles were lost because knowledgeable individuals were ignored and overridden by schedule. If people can't agree, then further work is necessary to show the better pathway even if there will be a delay. Sometimes, there is no solution. Example: Pluto was de-planet-ized by a vote to redefine the term, "planet".

ENGINEERING: Steve Jobs (co-founder of Apple Computer) always seemed to know what was possible. He looked for people that could make something happen, not people who did not have the ideas to make it happen. Engineering is about making something that never was, and there are a lot of choices to be made along the way. There may be several successful options. The key is to demonstrate that the option chosen can work within the constraints. Successful entrepreneurs can imagine useful products that do not yet exist, sell those products to investors and customers, and then make them happen within the cost constraints. Then comes the all-important sales job.

SOFTWARE: The US Department of Defense decided around 1975 that there were too many computer languages being used badly, so they set up a committee to design a new language. They came up with a language called "Ada" after mathematician Ada Byron Lovelace. The language was a compromise result from a committee and had several admirable features like the specification and the body along with object-oriented design. The problem was that the compilers were unwieldy, and programmers could not get the needed work done efficiently. In 1991, James Gosling (Sun Microsystems) came up with a new language that he called "Java". It took advantage of the best language features and proved to be successful; it is now used in most micro-devices and computers.

ETHICS: I have often said there are only two sets of rules that a company employee should follow: the government/security regulations and the ethics/personnel regulations. Failure to adhere to these regulations can cost both human lives and money. Beware, management interpretation of the rules, like religious based interpretation, can be incorrect and organizationally destructive.

SYMPATHY: My personal hiring error occurred when "Fay" from Caltech showed up for an interview half-hour late and frazzled; she had trouble finding the large building on a major street. She sweetly asked: "You are not going to hold that against me, are you?" We said no, just to keep her calm, and that was the wrong answer. She was from the enemy house at Caltech noted for poor thinking. I thought she would add some color to the place (she did) and couldn't be that bad from Caltech (she was). My vote was neutral, since I was trying not to be prejudiced. She should have been blackballed. She couldn't find her way through any software either. She messed up everything she touched and went on to a successful career in writing about science for a newspaper.

BRILLIANCE: This is the opposite error of the negative committee vote. My best recent hire was a barista (a non-technical occupation) who had graduated in engineering from UC Berkeley. He was reserved/quiet and had previously left another engineering job in aerospace due to boredom. The interview group was mostly neutral to negative. I thought he could get the job done and we could keep him busy, so I pushed hard for an offer letter. He did a good job on everything and is still with the company. There have been other candidates that were excellent, but were declined for some committee reason. If anyone thinks someone should absolutely be hired, then the interviewer should advocate. History is replete with both good and bad personnel decisions. General Douglas MacArthur evaluated then Colonel Dwight Eisenhower: "This is the best officer in the Army. In case of war, he should go straight to the top." Artist Salvador Dali refused to take his final exam from art school; he correctly stated that the professors there were unqualified to judge his art.