

In Praise of Lazy Men

NEED YOUR HELP. I'M CONSIDERING THREE CANDIDATES FOR A CORPORATE management position in my department. All three are well qualified technically. It's their personality traits that have me a bit confused.

CANDIDATE #1 is a talkative and friendly guy, who would fit in well with our entire staff. He has an unusual respect for people regardless of position level and treated our secretarial staff with the same deference as our senior executives. However, he listed his personal interests as "Civil War history, environmental studies, and contemplative loafing."

CANDIDATE #2 is much more reserved. He's a typical New Englander, independent-minded with a wry sense of humor, who uses words sparingly and gets to the point quickly. But in our interview, he admitted that "some people think I'm lazy" and didn't attempt to rigorously refute that observation.

CANDIDATE #3 possesses a wide-ranging intellect and a penchant for philosophizing. He has an ability to penetrate to the core of an issue and suggest unique solutions. When I called one of his references, a longtime family friend, these positive qualities were confirmed, but after some probing, she also offered that this candidate had "a tendency toward being lazy," preferring to put things off until later, and that he'd been doing this since his school days.

It's this recurrent theme of laziness that has me worried. Can I risk putting someone with a streak of laziness on my team? Is it contagious? Would such a person be alert to project deadlines and be structured enough to juggle the pressures of multiple assignments? More important, would such a person have that creative spark our organization needs to continue to prosper?

Needing some help, I turned to

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renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow for his insights on human behavior and motivation. Maslow believes that "creativity is correlated with the ability to withstand the lack of structure, the lack of predictability, the lack of control ... and the tolerance for ambiguity and planlessness."

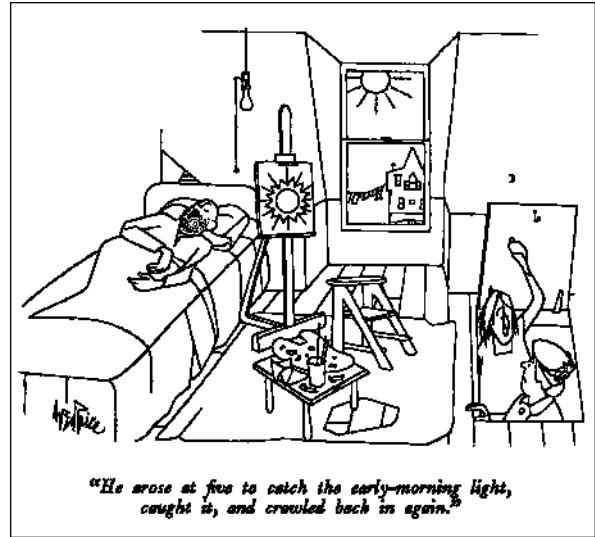
He further notes that these qualities "are also characteristic of loafing—which in itself is also essentially unmotivated, purposeless, without goal, and therefore without future."

So maybe this loafing is a good thing? What a dangerous idea! If accepted, should all of my managers build unstructured time into their workdays and allow some "white space" on their calendars? Does Palm Pilot even have that option?

As to alertness, Robert Nozick describes this skill as scanning and assessing information, almost unconsciously, relative to a certain framework. For instance, in his book *The Examined Life*, he defines entrepreneurial alertness as "the mind-set of being ready to notice and seize upon new opportunities, devising new ways to make things or new things to make, imagining possibilities consumers would welcome."

But Nozick also believes that "the independent avenues of alertness (for any one person) are very small, not more than two or three." So attempting to be alert to too many areas at once may, in fact, be a detriment to creativity. Or, as William James observed, "the art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook."

Returning to my candidate dilemma, I have a confession to make. The candidate profiles were drawn from historical



figures, not current résumés, but my struggle with the concepts is no less real.

Candidate #1 is based on Walt Whitman, who said of himself, "I loafe and invite my soul / I lean and loafe at my ease." And from that loafing came a radically new type of poetry: expansive, bold, and liberated from traditional structures.

Biographer Jay Parini wrote of the second candidate, Robert Frost: "People make much of his so called laziness. It was a necessary laziness. It was the way his mind, his imagination worked." It was a laziness that propelled him to be an influential poet, teacher, and recipient of several dozen honorary doctoral degrees.

And it was about Charles Baudelaire that Alex de Jonge wrote, "At 18 he was already beginning to pay the extravagant price of his laziness." Yet Baudelaire became one of the great poets in French literature and a leading art critic of his day.

Laziness and creativity. Do we get to choose, or are these traits inextricably linked? One could conclude that this combination might work in the literary world but would be ill suited to the world of business, but is this a risk worth taking?

I'm still a bit confused. Perhaps I'll wait for a few more résumés to arrive. Or maybe a nice long walk in a field of grass would help me to see this more clearly. In the meantime, do you have any creative suggestions to offer? ●