

The Hydrangea Conundrum

Stephen R Balzac

If you were following the news last summer, you've probably heard that, after the cancellation of the Rocky and Bullwinkle show, Boris and Natasha retired to Montclair, NJ. More specifically, the FBI announced the arrest of ten Russian spies whose mission appears to have been to infiltrate the PTA. At a certain level, the whole affair seems like a rather bizarre choice between putting together a deep-cover infiltration or having the New York Times delivered to your doorstep. What is particularly interesting, though, is the reaction of a neighbor of one of the accused spies:

"She couldn't be a spy. Look what she did with the hydrangeas!"

This one line has received a great deal of press, to say nothing of a featured spot on late night comedy. It is, on the surface, quite ludicrous. After all, what would hydrangeas have to do with whether or not someone is a spy? Of course, the traditional movie image of a spy generally involves someone in a trench coat and sunglasses, but so what? Even the most dedicated spy has to take that trench coat off sometimes!

Seriously, though, this is exactly the point: when we hear about spies, we have a certain mental image created from a mixture of James Bond, Jason Bourne, perhaps some John le Carré novels, and so forth. When we see something that is inconsistent with that image, we make certain assumptions and judgments, often without realizing it. It is, let's face it, hard to imagine James Bond planting hydrangeas. A good spy, though, is going to be aware of exactly this tendency and will take advantage of it: exactly because it is so hard to imagine James Bond planting hydrangeas is why he would do it.

The fact is, planting hydrangeas is as much an indication of whether or not someone is a spy as being



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charming in an interview is an indication that a person is a good hire or working long hours is an indication that someone is dedicated to the company.

OK, I realize that I'm taking a sacred cow and starting to grind it up into hamburger, so let's look at these different scenarios.

When I talk with different employers about what they're hoping to accomplish through their interview process, I get some interesting answers. The people higher up the management ladder tell me they're trying to find the best potential employees, while the people who are actually meeting with the candidates the most tell me they're looking for someone who will be fun to work with. This is rather like getting married, or not, after a first date.

While charming might be very nice and feel good in an interview, the worst prima donnas are often extremely charming and engaging for short periods of time. It isn't until you've worked with them for a while that it becomes obvious what you're dealing with. They know how to plant those hydrangeas, though, and are

fully prepared to take maximum advantage of the impression that gives. In fact, some of the most competent people come off the worst in interviews because they're seen as too intense or too "threatening." That last seems to mean, "more competent than I am!"

If the interview isn't structured and the interviewers trained appropriately, the hydrangea effect is going to produce a lot of false positives and false negatives!

The hydrangea effect is in also in full flower in employee evaluations. I can't count how often managers tell me that their best people are the ones who are working the most hours. Yet, when we actually look at results, we find that the correlation isn't quite there.

Focusing on accomplishments without looking at time spent reveals that quite often working long hours is just another form of the hydrangea effect. However, the fact is that a lot of people are well aware of the fact that visibly working late is a good way of currying favor and generating an image of dedication. This image is so powerful that I've even see the person doing inferior work be rated more highly than the superior performer who didn't work late. What is even more interesting is the implicit statement that someone who gets the job done slowly is more valuable than someone who gets it done quickly. Consider that the next time you're sitting

around waiting for the mechanic to finish working on your car!

While it's clearly the case that the hydrangea effect makes it hard to catch spies, that's not going to be an issue for most of us. When it causes us to hire or reward the wrong people then it can lead to some rather unpleasant corporate hay fever, and that is an issue for most businesses.

So how do you tell when the hydrangea effect is influencing your decisions?

Next time you find yourself saying, "He must be a good hire because he's so well-dressed and charming," or "She must be doing great work because she works such long hours," try

replacing everything after the word "because" with: "he/she did such amazing things with the hydrangeas." Does it still sound equally valid? You should have a very different reaction in either of those examples than if the sentence was "She's must be doing great work because she meets all her deadlines and the customers love her stuff."

In other words, are you focusing on something real, such as results, or are you being distracted by the colorful flowers?

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