



The Effective Organization

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The Godot Effect

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Personally, I wouldn't even know him if I saw him.

- Estragon, *Waiting for Godot*

Some years ago I was sitting in a product design meeting. The discussion kept circling around some particularly knotty issues that no one in the room actually knew much about. In one sense, this wasn't a serious problem given that the company was still actively hiring and there was a recognition that more people were needed. Someone finally commented that we'd have to make sure to hire someone with the particular expertise in question and, in one fell swoop, that task was assigned to a non-existent person. Again, this is not necessarily a problem... yet. It became a problem, however, as the meeting progressed:

"We don't have anyone on the team who can handle [...technology...] either."

"That'll be the next hire."

"Wasn't the next hire supposed to be [...original problem...]?"

"We'll need someone who can do both."

And so it went, with each problem that came up being assigned to the same non-existent person. Each problem would be dealt with when the right person was hired. Unfortunately, each individual present had a very different idea of what that right person looked like and the necessary skills that he or she would possess. Those who have

ever read a college catalog might have noticed the vast number of courses in a wide range of subjects taught by Staff. Well, by the end of that meeting, Dr. Staff was probably the only person who could have handled the job.

More recently, I was conducting a training exercise. The exercise was focused on leadership, negotiation, and creative problem solving. Part of the structure involved people being given a problem and a list of names of people who might be able to help them. Only some of those people are actually present. The objective is to figure out alternate solutions that do not involve the missing people. What was particularly fascinating is that every time I've conducted this exercise a significant number of participants become fixated on the missing people, convinced that if those people were present all the problems would immediately evaporate. They spend the entire exercise waiting for help that never arrives.

When I ask at the end, "Why do you think that [missing] person will actually help you? What if they have their own agenda?" the participants are taken aback. They had never considered the fact that Godot might have his own wants and needs, even if he should happen to show up. I've run this exercise with managers, college students, psychologists, engineers, and so forth, and the same behaviors emerge every time. In each case, the person who is not present becomes the repository of the hopes and dreams of the rest of the group.

Publications

Reality from Fantasy: Using Predictive Scenarios to Explore Ethical Dilemmas in "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play."

[Take off your hat: You're in the presence of culture](#) was published in the January 2010 issue of Analog Science Fiction/Fact.

[How to Effectively Motivate Your Team](#) was published in CareerSmart Advisor

[Who's In Charge Here?](#) was published in the CEO Refresher



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In the end, that "person" has become a tool whose only purpose for existing is to solve the problems of the group.

The difficulty, of course, is that the longer this behavior persists, the harder it is for the organization to find anyone they are willing to hire. First, none of the people they are looking at actually fits the mental image that they've developed: a person with some of the desired skills is simply not recognized or passed over for a future someone who will have *all* the skills. Unfortunately, Dr. Staff is a very busy person and is somewhat less likely to show up than Santa Claus. Second, Dr. Staff is not only expected to show up eventually, but to be totally and completely enthusiastic about working for the company. People who do not exhibit that mindless enthusiasm are deemed to be not serious candidates. Hiring, however, is a two-way street: part of the job of the existing employees is to help get the candidate excited about the company. To be fair, the search rarely lasts forever. Eventually, people get tired of interviewing candidates and someone does get hired. Often, though, it's the last person to walk through the door as opposed to the most qualified of the people who came through.

So how do you avoid getting stuck waiting for Godot?

Start by focusing on goals and objectives. What are you trying to accomplish? How will you know when you've succeeded? View the job from the perspective of goals not skills. Quantify what you're trying to do and figure out how you'll recognize someone who can

accomplish one or more of those major goals.

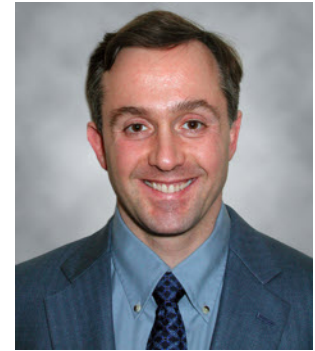
Second, look for people who have a track record of getting things done. Remember that there are often multiple solutions to any problem. The skills you see as necessary only represent one possible path. People who are good at solving problems in a particular field may well find other solutions that will be more effective. Good problem solvers are also the most likely people to acquire skills when they need them, whereas people who just have skills might not be good at solving problems.

Next, look for passion and enthusiasm when they talk about the work they've done and the problems they've solved. Don't worry about whether or not they're enthusiastic about *this* company and *this* job. If you're offering them the chance to do what they love doing, that'll come quick enough.

Take the time to find out what they're looking for. Don't make the hiring process all about you; make it about them. After all, when you make someone an offer, you want them to accept it. Take the time to connect with the candidate and give them every opportunity to feel that they'll enjoy working with you.

Finally, periodically check and evaluate your progress. Make sure you're not looking for Dr. Staff or waiting for Godot.

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

Steve is a contributing author to *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play* and the author of *The 36-Hour Course on Organizational Development*, due out later this year from McGraw-Hill.

He serves on the board of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and is the president of the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

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