

That's An Amazing Serve!

Certain expert tennis players have a trick of saying to an opponent, "That's an amazing serve! However do you do it?" as they switch sides of the net.

Suddenly the opponent's amazing serve fizzles. By making the other player think about the physical mechanics of what he's doing and focus his attention on his body, instead of on the ball, that one question can completely change the course of a game.

Many practitioners of jujitsu and aikido learn the unbendable arm: they are told to extend their arm and imagine water jetting out at high pressure. Their arm becomes incredibly hard to bend. If they try to focus on the muscles, the arm is relatively easy to bend.

A similar trick is used by proponents of medical magnets and various other magic therapies: they'll ask you hold your thumb and forefinger together on your right hand, and really focus on keeping those fingers together. They'll then grab your fingers and pull them apart. Next, they have you hold the magnet or the magic herb packet in your other hand, and imagine the strength it's giving you. Suddenly, your fingers can't be pulled apart.

It's a cool trick. I reproduce it regularly by claiming my MIT class ring is magnetic and having the other person hold it in their non-dominant hand. I then tell them to imagine the "magnetic force" moving through their body and holding together the fingers of the hand not holding the ring. Even though people know there's obviously a gimmick, the trick works virtually every time. Magnetism has nothing to do with it, as evidenced by the fact that an MIT class ring is not, in reality, magnetic.

So what's going on? It turns out that when you focus someone's attention on the mechanics of how their body moves, it scrambles their ability to do it. On the other hand, when you focus attention on a particular effect or result, be that a good serve, an unbendable arm, or keeping your fingers together, the body figures out the best way to achieve the desired result. That simple question, "However do you do it?" serves to focus attention on the mechanics of the serve, not the effect, and thus scrambles the body's ability to move correctly.

On a personal level, we become less capable when we attempt to micromanage ourselves. We become more capable when we learn to trust ourselves to exercise our skills in the ways that make the most sense for us. We do best when we have the freedom to focus on what we want to accomplish and discover the best way of accomplishing it, instead of being locked into one way of doing it.

What is even more interesting is that the behavior of teams mimics the behavior of individuals. The more a manager attempts to control the details of how the team is doing its job, the less capable the team becomes. The expert leader knows how to trust his team and gets out of their way.

The beginning jujitsu player attempts to make every element of the move perfect: they try to turn their arm at just the right angle, step to just the right spot, and so forth. They are stiff and awkward. The

master knows the result she wants and produces it, confident that her body will do the right thing. What is the difference between the novice and the master? Correct practice. Obvious though this point may be, if you practice the wrong things, you'll do the wrong things. The key to trusting yourself is to practice with a focus on the effects you are trying to achieve, not the detailed mechanics of how you do it.

A team is no different: a leader learns to trust his team and the members learn to trust the team and the leader through constant practice. Working with other people is a skill; arguing effectively with your colleagues is a skill; giving and receiving help is a skill; making decisions as a group and being able to work with those decisions is a skill. Like jujitsu, however, these skills must be learned through correct practice. The novice who practices incorrectly improves slowly, if at all. He may do more advanced techniques, but he does them with the same awkwardness and wasted energy of a beginner. The team which focuses on the wrong skills or where attention is always focused on the details instead of the desired results may be given more difficult projects, but it does them with the wasted effort and poor use of resources as it did when it first got together.

For example, when teams come together and attempt to leap straight into project definition and problem solving, they are focusing on the wrong skills. They haven't yet learned how to be a team. Before they can define the project or solve problems they have to learn how to make decisions that they can all support. That doesn't mean they all have to agree with the decision, but every team member must be able to enthusiastically implement whatever the team decides. That won't happen if the team doesn't know how to settle disputes and achieve consensus without splitting itself into factions.

Unfortunately, when teams focus on the wrong skills, leaders are unable to trust those teams to make good decisions. The leader, therefore, makes all the decisions. While this may be a great way to get started, it starts to break down as the problems become more complex. This causes the leader to attempt ever tighter control of the team, with increasingly poor results.

At one major manufacturing firm I worked with, a certain engineering director was the go-to guy. He could solve every problem, and the team knew it. The director often complained that if he was stuck in a meeting, work came to a screeching halt, assuming it ever got moving fast enough to screech as it halted! The idea of taking a vacation wasn't even in the cards.

The solution was to help him back off and let go of his control. Instead of solving their problems, he started walking the team through his problem-solving process. Instead of answering questions, he showed them how he found the answers to those questions. Instead of making the decisions, he helped them develop effective decision-making skills. It was pretty uncomfortable at first: the team got it wrong a lot, and he kept imagining what his boss was going to say to him if things didn't work out. After a while, though, the team started to get the idea. Their problem-solving and decision-making skills improved. The more those skills improved, the more they could focus on the results they were after, not the details of how they got to those results.

One of the difficult transitions for jujitsu practitioners is discovering that doing very little yields the biggest response. Focusing on what should happen to their partner allows the technique to become effortless. This director had the equivalent experience: although he felt like he was doing less and less,

his team was accomplishing more and more. The less he focused them on the details of getting things done, the more they were able to do. Eventually, he was able to focus his time and energy on long-term strategic thinking, instead of day-to-day minutia.

Trusting yourself, or your team, to do the right thing isn't magic. It's the result of hard work and correct practice. The more you control the details, the harder the task becomes. The more you enable your team to deal with the details, the easier it is for everyone and the higher the quality of the results.

Sometimes less really is more.

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