



It's all in the team

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A few weeks ago, I gave a webinar on what makes for a successful research agency. I was staggered by the attention that it received, with hundreds of people attending from eight-nine countries. Afterwards, many people wrote and asked the same question: “what is the single one thing that makes for a successful agency?”. I didn’t need to think too much about my answer, because it has been the same for decades – it’s the team you build around you.

I was a research company CEO for eighteen years before founding Cambiar. In that time, I was blessed with some outstanding teams made up of extraordinary individuals. Some of these are very well-known today and have reached the pinnacle of the profession. Others were content to operate behind the scenes. All of them were fundamental to success.

The interesting thing about these teams was that the individuals who were key to their success occupied such a variety of roles and brought such diverse talents to bear that there was no prescribed formula to their make-up. As I look around the industry, I see this time and again – different talents, different leadership skills, different approaches. But they all have one thing in common – the ability to inspire. Whether they were polymaths, strategists, people leaders, entrepreneurs, new thinkers, methodologists, account executives or statisticians, they were all inspiring.

The first person to truly inspire me was my lifelong mentor. A consummate CEO, he was the ultimate *strategist*, never afraid to think out of the box, to take risks. Many of the risks he took were on talent – placing bets on young people in whom he saw the potential for leadership. He built one of the world’s most consequential research companies. Another such strategist was my second-in-command in an Italian research company that I ran. Unflappable, with huge integrity, he could divine the future and steer a course towards it, all the while bringing his people along with him. He went on to lead the largest supermarket chain in Italy.

Then there are the people leaders, the *empathists*. Two in particular stand out in my memory. One went on to lead one of the largest agencies in the UK while the other led the most profitable media research agency in the history of the United States. Both of them led not only by example, but also through tremendous empathy with their staff and their clients. They emphasised training and mentoring of young researchers, their doors were always open. They were courageous, not afraid to stand up to superiors who would threaten what they were

building for short-term gain. They acted as a beacon for their respective companies and for the industry as a whole.

Very often, key members of the team were those who didn't seek the limelight – especially the *methodologists* and *statisticians*. Invariably, these were people not only possessed of incredible intelligence and talent, but who also displayed huge integrity. They not only taught their craft but lived it, believing strongly in both the fundamental foundations that underly research and the need for transparency in its execution. Some of these have been instrumental in guiding governments through the Covid-19 pandemic with models grounded not in politics but in science.

Also key are our *account and relationship executives* who live and breathe their clients' success. I have been fortunate enough to have had some of the very best of these on my teams – people who can take a new relationship and build it into a \$10m or \$20m account. Because they care. Because they will deploy the best resources – the best of the rest of the team – to achieve success for their clients.

Amidst all of these are a very rare breed – the *polymaths*. These are people who combine many of the talents I have talked about above and excel at all. I have worked with statisticians who can visualize mathematics in three dimensions, strategize their insights in terms of the client's business, tell a compelling story and build business. Find one of these? Pay them a lot of money!

Beyond all this, the profession today is blessed with *entrepreneurs* and *new thinkers*. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that remains strong and vibrant. Our industry has long thrived because talented people spun out of major companies and set up their own agencies – some of our most famous industry brand names started in this way. But today, we have people new to the profession who are challenging our way of thinking. This is not confined to technology start-ups but includes young entrants who bring a whole new approach to our craft. Just the other day, I listened to a young lady give a presentation on the linkage between eco-biology and market research. It was impressive.

But teams are not only built up of people on the front lines or who are in the business of research or analytics. There are also those who make up the *backbone* of our enterprises. One of the most important relationships any CEO can have is that with her or his CFO. I have been fortunate enough to have worked with four outstanding CFOs who not only had my back through thick and thin, but also understood intimately the workings of the business and were instrumental in keeping the team moving forward. Similarly, human resources officers who understood that their role was strategic, not administrative; CTOs who pushed the boundaries of what technology could do for us; operations executives who built efficiency and cost advantage into our business; graphics leaders who could tell our stories. The list goes on.

The key to all of this lies in David Ogilvy's famous words: "If each of us hires people that are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants."

How right he was.