

FOOTNOTES | BY PAULINA BORSOOK

# Cut Rate

*The case against the best of...anything.*

“One procedure that is recommended for ranking people is called “alternate ranking.” With this procedure, one begins by first selecting the best person and then the worst person ①. Of those who remain to be rated, the second best person is then selected followed by the second worst person. This procedure is completed when all persons ② have been ranked ③. Obviously, the rater’s task gets continually more difficult as he or she moves towards the middle area of the rank ordering, where performance levels are more difficult to distinguish.”

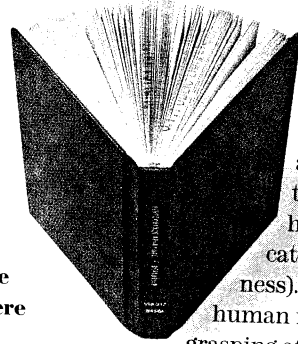
—PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL: ASSESSING HUMAN BEHAVIOR AT WORK. BY H. JOHN BERNARDIN (VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY AND FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY) AND RICHARD W. BEATTY (UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER AND BALL STATE UNIVERSITY) ④

# R

ating the best ⑤ is an oddity in our winner-take-all economic times. In lean, mean, anorexic corporations, often there’s only one person left where once there was an entire department, or three where there were twenty.

Determining the best is either easy or beside the point—if the best is also the middle-ranked and the worst. As for the ranking of job applicants, it’s similarly skewed but to two other extremes: Either jobs attract too many desperate, perfect applicants, so ranking the best is irrelevant, or applicants attract too many desperate, perfect employers, so rating the best is impossible. An ex-boyfriend who’d graduated with honors from Chicago, had a Ph.D. from Cornell, awards, fellowships, etc., was one of 900 applicants, half of them as accomplished as he, competing for the two jobs in his field. The nontenured junior faculty at the College of Charleston—where he ended up teaching bonehead English—were also Ivy-level grads, far more qualified than the older, tenured faculty above them. Compare this to the geek dinner parties I attend in San Francisco, where some Internet-related executive is always inquiring discreetly though desperately if anyone knows of any engineers with Oracle experience. They’ll take whomever they can get/steal from their competitors.

⑥ English has had a perfectly good nonsexist plural for person, that is, people, for a very long



time. The use of the politically correct plural *persons* is a perfect example of the substitution of hypercorrectness for competence (e.g., people worried about proper grammar who utter locutions such as, “She gave her astrolabe to he and I,” which seem to them like educated speech but solely broadcast nervousness). Management science in general and human resources in particular are always grasping after rule-making in a universe that really can’t have rules. Being a good manager is like being a good teacher or parent: It’s mostly innate. Either you instinctively understand how to read people and bring out what’s best in them, or you don’t. No amount of rules-of-thumb-from-Fantasyland can change that. Hence, the desperate desire that there be rules—or what else would these people have to sell?—and, by extension, adherence to a supposed rule of contemporary grammatical propriety.

⑦ Rating is a strange thing once you leave school. In the military, enlisted personnel can collect slackers’ goof-off ratings forever and nothing bad will happen only if an officer is passed over for promotion three times is a forced retirement intimated. Whereas in my first encounter with ratings in the corporate world, I did everything more or less as demanded by my job description (in fifth grade, a 95+) but was given an average rating (figure a C) and a minimal raise. Because, in the real world, unlike in school, unless you fulfill 85 percent of what’s expected, you are fired/flunk out. Yet from what I saw of my boss at the time—clean office, *immaculate* desk—her performance would have been rated abysmal. But as a corporate climber, she was a streaking, shrieking, cracking marvel, leaving the company within weeks of a major promotion. How she managed up so well, while managing down so poorly, was entirely opaque to those under her. You do the math.

⑧ It’s strange how academics who write management books always seem to be employed at educational institutions whose own ratings vis-à-vis the academic establishment’s aren’t the best. But then, they’re probably no worse at giving advice than the CEOs who have biographies ghostwritten for them at the moment in their careers when managed perception ranks them best of breed. Think of where *Odyssey* came in John Sculley’s career. Now he should feel *lucky* to write a book with Bernardin and Beatty. *ST*