

Bronze makes you happier than silver!

Psychologists Victoria Medvec and Thomas Gilovich have described an interesting phenomenon of counterfactual thinking: they discovered that bronze medallists are often happier than silver medallists. This study provided an explanation for a behaviour I frequently observe in my coaching clients.

Peter Näf

What is the reason for the greater satisfaction of third-place finishers compared to those in second place? The researchers found that it comes down to how medallists make comparisons. The silver medallist compares herself to the gold medallist, sees how narrowly she missed out on gold, and feels disappointed as a result.

The bronze medallist, on the other hand, compares himself to those who didn't win a medal at all - and feels correspondingly more satisfied. So, what does this mean for my coaching clients, who are not involved in elite sports?

No silver medal in job applications

In the job application process, there's only one winner. You might argue that it's pointless to think about the non-existent second place. Yet I often observe that my clients are particularly frustrated when they make it to the final round - only to be turned down. This disappointment is understandable. What surprises me, however, is the intensity of their frustration compared to situations in which they are eliminated earlier in the process. The study offers a plausible explanation for this reaction.

Still, even the «unrewarded» second place is an achievement and should encourage job

seekers. After all, they usually prevail over many other highly qualified candidates.

...and yet, second place is a success!

If coaching clients make it to the final round, it's not only a sign that their qualifications are a good fit - it also means they did a lot right during the application process. For morale and self-esteem, it's essential to interpret rejections correctly. However, many blame themselves and see the rejection as a personal failure.

In reality, recruiters and hiring managers often struggle with the final decision themselves. It's not uncommon for them to be unable to clearly explain afterward why one candidate was chosen over another. Naturally, even a gut decision will be rationalized later - just as I described in the article «Homo sapiens? by no means!»

Sometimes, being rejected at the final stage even leads applicants to dangerous conclusions: one client had the bad luck of being the runner-up three times in a row. As a result, he no longer wanted to apply in his preferred field - convinced he didn't stand a chance there. A fatal misjudgment! Because shortly afterward, he landed a top position - precisely in that very field.

And so, the circle closes with the medallists from the study: even in sports, top performers often need several attempts before finally reaching the highest step on the podium.

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