

Why do the most beautiful people have the ugliest dogs?

Let me say this upfront: I like pugs! But even the most devoted pug lovers will probably agree with me: according to conventional standards of beauty, they are not exactly stunning creatures. Popular psychology would have us believe that attractive people choose ugly dogs so that they themselves appear even more flawless by comparison.

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Don't worry! The theory is unlikely to withstand scientific scrutiny.

Nevertheless, it serves as an excellent illustration of the observation I want to make: in personnel selection, people are always judged relative to a reference group. Applications and recruitment are not an exact science but rather an art based on experience (see article below).

Evaluation is relative

Whether I perceive someone as talented depends on whom I compare them with. The best golfer in his local club may be a hero but compared to Tiger Woods he is a beginner. Most of the time, we are not even aware of these reference groups. Once we become aware of them, however, we can influence them—as the following example illustrates.

A client came to me for job interview coaching because he had repeatedly received the same feedback after interviews: he did not express himself clearly enough.

I simulated a job interview with him. Indeed, he struggled to communicate clearly. Even after another training session, his communication skills seemed out of step with his impressive professional track record. I began to doubt his ability to

think in a differentiated way and did not rate him particularly highly.

Tell your whole story!

Then I noticed something. My client spoke Swiss German with a slight foreign accent. His CV offered few clues: Swiss citizen, native languages German and Spanish, first entry: apprenticeship qualification. I cautiously asked where he had spent the first years of his life. The question visibly made him uncomfortable. Yet his answer explained a great deal: he had moved to Switzerland at the age of fifteen without speaking any German. He learned the language in a remarkably short time and subsequently completed a successful educational and professional career without interruption.

Once I stopped comparing him with native German speakers, my perception of him changed dramatically for the better. Applicants often reveal too little about their starting point and thereby deprive recruiters of the opportunity to compare them with the appropriate reference group.

As our conversation continued, it became clear that he had deliberately and skilfully written his CV in a way that concealed his migration background. A pity. By doing so, he had effectively compared himself with people who had enjoyed a linguistic head start. Against that reference group, he appeared slightly weaker than he actually was.

A clever pug would probably respond to my cheeky remark at the beginning like this: "I may not be the most beautiful dog, but among pugs, I am one of the most attractive."

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